TOWARDS A TRANS-CARIBBEAN POETICS:
A NEW AESTHETICS OF POWER AND RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes how Caribbean-American writers living elsewhere challenge common ideas about power, violence and oppression through the reinterpretation of Caribbean dictatorial regimes in their fiction, and how their stories fare in comparison to other narrative traditions such as the Latin American dictator novel genre. The works of Julia Alvarez (The Dominican Republic), Edwidge Danticat (Haiti) and Junot Díaz (The Dominican Republic) share thematic and biographical similarities and reveal an emerging aesthetic with definite textual and thematic traits that I identify as Trans-Caribbean, a poetics with four main constitutive aspects. First, it addresses the tensions between individualism and collectivism in Caribbean discourse. Second it addresses the implicit role of logo centrism in shaping cultural narratives. Third, it presents fragmentation as a phenomenon that is both discursive and thematic. Finally, it develops the multiple strategies of visual and linguistic disruption in order to suspend normative representations of Caribbean identity. Trans-Caribbean Poetics is trans-continental, fragmentary, personal, relational and multilingual and suggests a plausible model to analyze discursive relations in a transnational context.
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INTRODUCTION

“A common thread runs through these texts: the perception that the Caribbean is important mostly from the outside. Invariably, these analyses stress the benefit or harm the region has brought or can bring to the continental powers… Aside from that connection, their view reduces the Caribbean experience to a threnody of historical dispossession. The legacy of the people who live, work, suffer and create there fails to attract their attention.” Silvio Torres-Saillant

“If our country [Haiti] were ever given a chance and allowed to be in a country like any other, none of us would live or die here [in the USA]” Edwidge Danticat

Notions of power and oppression in the Caribbean have generally been attributed to a foreign other. Colonialism and a long history of foreign interventions, which too often result in authoritarian governments of a violent and oppressive nature, have created a cultural discursive legacy in which power is treated as a concept alien to the natural development of the Caribbean region. In turn, this cultural legacy prevents the Caribbean subject from acknowledging his or her complicit participation in such dynamics. Furthermore, these ideas advance what Silvio Torres-Saillant identifies as a “threnody of historical dispossession,” the idea that Caribbean discourse can only find validation in relation to larger (and more powerful) cultural traditions.

The reality of the immediate past, however, undermines this theoretical presumption of being powerless. For starters, dictatorial regimes, a local and extreme expression of authoritarianism, constitute a prevalent example of politics as usual in the recent past of the Spanish and French Caribbean. These regimes demonstrate a shift in which normative ideas of power, oppression and location are no longer alien but domestic happenstances. This research suggest that this shift has brought forth an emerging aesthetic, with definite textual and thematic traits, that addresses the particularities of the Caribbean experience and its people while simultaneously exploring it ties to other discursive traditions. To do this, *Trans-Caribbean*
poetics emphasize on the relevance of a Caribbean discursive tradition that speaks to the transnational interactions typical and constituent of the region, to make us reconsider choices of language, discipline and cultural practices within any given text in light of current global exchanges.

Traditional narratives of dictatorship characterize the dictator as a figure alien to the nation, because of its presumed—ideological and economical—ties to former empires, which in turn, is identified with the perpetuation of previous political systems of foreign domination and the structures established by them, such as colonialism, slavery, sugar plantations and the establishment of military bases (just to name a few). As I will demonstrate later, because dictators and caudillos are practically indistinguishable from each other in Latin American and Caribbean discourse, dictatorial regimes convey a clearly established national project in agreement with the ideals of the nineteenth century Latin American wars of independence. The dictator is, naturally, at the center of these narrative and ideological projects and, as such, he organizes and gives meaning to both. In the particular case of the Caribbean, however, he is also at odds with the transnational realities of Caribbean culture itself.

This dissertation analyzes how Caribbean writers living elsewhere challenge the traditional inscriptions of power, violence and oppression in Caribbean discourse. A new Trans-Caribbean poetics is emerging, based on the tension between the individual and the collective; the function of space in relation to organizing centers or their absence; the reality of fragmentation as a phenomenon that is both discursive and thematic; and in general, linguistic and visual strategies of disruption. These four aspects constitute new creative responses to normative representations of dictatorial regimes in the Caribbean. How does a Trans-Caribbean
poetics emerge from these ideas? In the following paragraphs I briefly describe the historical and ideological grounds behind these questions.

**The Dictatorship of Writing: A Caribbean Tradition?**

The dictator novel, a well-known genre in the Latin American literary tradition, provides Caribbean writers with a narrative structure to consider the pervasive effects of institutional power and oppression. Until very recently, Latin American and Caribbean dictatorial representations were practically undistinguishable from each other.

Latin American scholars agree that the modern rendition of the dictator novel genre has its thematic origins in the figure of the caudillo, that is, the charismatic militia leader of the South American independence wars. Caudillos were populist leaders who relied on their charisma to exert power over a society torn by war and civil unrest. The first acknowledged caudillo narrative that would forever link the figures of dictators and caudillos in the American imagination is *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* (1845). Here, Argentinean author Domingo Faustino Sarmiento tells the story of a real caudillo (Juan Facundo Quiroga) and created an allegory directed against the repressive government of Argentinean dictator Juan Manuel Rosas.

Sarmiento’s story established the literary and ideological conventions later adopted by the Latin American dictator novel. From that point forward, caudillos and dictators have been inseparable in the American imagination. Even more importantly *Facundo* identified violence and power with specific spaces. In the words of Kathleen Ross, the novel explored “the Argentine national character, the effects of land configuration on personality, the “barbaric” nature of the countryside versus the “civilizing” influence of the city, and the great future awaiting Argentina when it opened its doors wide to European immigration” (Ross 2003, 17). The ambivalent reactions toward caudillos and dictators are closely related to these spatial
configurations. Space, in effect, becomes geography. National figures of power are always preferred over foreigners. As I’ll explain later in my research, the dictator novel genre became an exercise in localization.

But how does the caudillo novel informs Caribbean cultural discourse or vice versa? It is Alejo Carpentier who links the caudillo novel to the Caribbean through his dictator novel, *El Reino de este mundo*. This novel, which concerns the Haitian revolution and the resultant first Caribbean dictatorial regime, established the grounds for a Latin American poetics different from those existing in European narrative traditions. In his famous prologue, Carpentier labeled this new poetics “lo real maravilloso,” which was the idea that two different orders of reality—the conventionally real and the marvelous, or the European and the indigenous—could exist at one and the same time within the same text, even within the same image. The “real maravilloso” would become the “realismo mágico” or “magical realism” associated with the Boom writers of the 1960’s and 1970’s: Juan Rulfo, Julio Cortazar, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Jose Donoso, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante. It is a particular Latin American poetics grounded in a geographical space: Latin America and the Caribbean. The Boom, anchored in the political upheavals of the sixties and seventies, found its political counterpart in the Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro. José Donoso further explains:

I believe this faith and political unanimity—or almost unanimity [towards the Cuban Revolution]—was then, and kept on being, until the Padilla Affair in 1971, one of the main factors in the internationalization of the Hispanic American novel, unifying intentions and goals, providing an ideological structure from which it could be sensed from time to time a feeling of continental coherence (Donoso 1972, 46).

It was during this time that Latin American literature took center stage. Many scholars and writers were leftist in their political orientation. There was a concerted attempt among these authors to write about the social and political conditions of Latin America and the Caribbean as a
result of opposing political ideologies. Out of this attempt emerged a narrative project, tentatively entitled “Los padres de la patria,” which was to be centered on dictators and caudillo-like figures. Several of the Boom writers wrote dictator novels: Carlos Fuentes wrote *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, Gabriel García Márquez wrote *El otoño del patriarca*, Mario Vargas Llosa eventually wrote *La fiesta del chivo*.

The dictator novel became the favored metaphor for a Latin American poetics of identity. Roberto González Echevarría, for example, calls the dictator novel “the most clearly indigenous thematic tradition in Latin American literature” (González Echevarría 1985, 195). Likewise, contemporary scholars often use this metaphor to consider the future of Latin American Studies. For Brett Levinson, “the institution of literature is a synecdoche for the establishment of the too-strong state. And its overturning, by extension, is a trope for the democratization of Latin America: An activity that mirrors the goals of postdictatorship intervention, or *la transición*” (Levinson 2001, 5). The relation between literature and dictatorial regimes in Latin America is such that the decline of the dictator novel is identified with the end of Latin American literature as we know it.

While the dictator novel genre remains a fundamental part of a Latin American poetics, it remains a strait-jacket for Caribbean authors, who rarely see their experiences included, except in their most allegorical and generic aspects. To add insult to injury, Caribbean dictatorial experiences are only recognized as such when they conform to very specific ideological templates. Dictatorial experiences, for example, are conventionalized through their most brutal instances. The dictator’s rule becomes the triumph of the ego: the needs of individuals over the needs of the group. Likewise, Caribbean dictatorial experiences are classified depending on their perceived ties to foreign orders. When these regimes contend for an independent nation freed of
all foreign interests, they are characterized as leftist social revolutions and rearticulated as acts of courageous resistance against the powerful imperial other; modeled after the spirit of the Haitian and Cuban revolutions.¹ Jean-Jacques Dessalines, for example, is often touted as Haiti’s greatest hero in the Haitian Revolution, but he is rarely acknowledged as the first Haitian dictator (self-proclaimed Emperor for Life). Likewise, there is still debate on whether Fidel Castro is a revolutionary or a despot; most people agreeing instead on the term “caudillo.” Both Dessalines and Castro were adamantly against a foreign imperial other, whether France or the United States.

On the contrary, regimes such as the ones by Fulgencio Batista, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo and Augusto Pinochet are unequivocally characterized as dictatorial regimes from a right-wing perspective because of their foreign affiliations with other countries. To denounce their abuses, these affiliations are highlighted as essential to understand their acts. Thus, revolutions and dictatorial regimes are represented as opposites, both articulations prone to the ideological premises outlined by a Latin American narrative discourse.

Nowadays, the critical reexamination of the Latin American Boom project, in light of new practices of global consumption,² has caused a renewed interest in dictatorial narratives. Idelber Avelar, for example, identifies the literature produced in the aftermath of Latin American dictatorships as “post-dictatorial fiction.” This type of fiction is an attempt “to come to terms

¹ Michael J. Dash for example, contends that the Haitian Revolution was “both a foundational moment in French universalist thought and a point of origin for postcolonial Caribbean societies,” and then adds “And yet, despite this conception of the Haitian revolution as a nodal point in global interactive history, we continue to see it as unique or exceptional, a moment in a simple heroic, foundational narrative for Caribbean anti-colonial resistance.”(Munro & Walcott-Hacksow 2006, 11)

with the past, but also to define its position in the new present ushered in by the new military regimes: "a global market in which every corner of social life has been commodified" (Avelar 1999, 1). Although Avelar’s theoretical contributions for Latin American literature are undeniable, this characterization of a post-dictatorial era based on South American dictatorial experiences is limited, to say the least. His ideas are strongly informed by the presumption that dictatorial regimes in Latin America always preceded a free/neoliberal market. The exclusion of Caribbean dictatorial experiences, however, undermined his analyses, which do not seem to fit with some of the most recent and pervasive examples of authoritarianism in the American hemisphere. In all fairness these authoritarian governments mostly developed shortly after his book was published, such as those of Hugo Chavez (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua), and Rafael Correa (Ecuador).

Idelber Avelar proposes dictatorships (and its narratives) as a critical stage where Latin American societies “transit from the modern national state to the transnational post-state market” (58-59). This statement makes his exclusion of the Caribbean even more puzzling given the relationship between Caribbean cultural discourse and Western consumer culture. Quoting Mimi Sheller: “some of the deepest ethical dilemmas associated with capitalist modernity occurred in relation to the transatlantic commerce in slaves and in products produced by people enslaved in the Caribbean” (Sheller 2003, 13). Furthermore, Avelar implies that dictatorial experiences are events from the past that are not relevant to the present realities of a globalized world. In my view, this implication is simply mistaken.

It is perhaps all too common in academic circles that, with reference to the Caribbean, power, oppression and violence are explained through the presence and influence of a foreign other. This paradigmatic explanation encourages complacent ideas about Caribbean cultures that
at times are fostered even by prominent Caribbean scholars. One example comes to mind. In a recent interview, Edouard Glissant claimed that ethnic massacres were alien practices in Caribbean cultures:

Si on observe réellement la situation dans le monde, à l'heure actuelle on s'aperçoit que dans la plupart des cultures ataviques, il y a une conception excluante du secteur de l'identité alors que dans les cultures composites, cette possibilité-là est à peu près nulle. Dans la Caraïbe, par exemple, il est évident qu'il n'y a pas de possibilité de massacres ethniques ou de purification ethnique à cause de la notion même d'ethnicité qu'on y trouve. Il y a d'autres problèmes, mais pas celui-là parce que la Caraïbe est un archipel de pays qui sont nés de la créolisation. L'histoire de la Caraïbe est une histoire de la créolisation et les pays composites ne peuvent pas se lancer dans l'aventure de la racine unique, de la pureté de la race ou de la langue (Schwieger 1998).

[If you observe the current global situation, it is clear than in most atavistic cultures there is an exclusive notion of identity whereas in heterogeneous cultures these notions are almost non-existent. In the Caribbean, for example it is clear that there is no possibility of ethnic massacres or ethnic cleansing because of the prevailing concepts of ethnicity in this region. There are other problems but not in the Caribbean because it is an archipelago of countries born out of the creolization process. The history of the Caribbean is the history of creolization and heterogenous countries cannot allow themselves to be carried away with notions of racial or linguistic purity] (My translation).

This interview, which took place in Berlin on the occasion of Glissant’s conference *Penser l'Europe de nouveau: Médias électroniques, oralité e identité*, is a recent example of the commodification of Caribbean cultures. Ironically, it was published by *Mots pluriel* in October 8, 2008; a date that concurs with the commemoration of the Haitian Massacre along the Dominican border in 1937. Glissant imagines the Caribbean only through its opposition to an imperial other.

In the interview, he identifies two main cultural orders: atavistic and heterogeneous cultures. Atavistic cultures are those that seek to expand their colonial expansion because of their beliefs in creational myths that justify such expansions. Heterogeneous cultures, on the contrary, are characterized by their colonial history, and as such, lack the means or the luxury to believe in creation myths. According to Glissant’s ideas, the Caribbean is an example of heterogeneous
cultures, whereas Europe and the United States (characterized by the proliferation of religious sects) are typical examples of atavistic cultures.

Glissant’s argument echoes the idea that a diverse and fragmented community has been part of the theoretical core of Caribbean discursive tradition for a long time. However, it also shows the reluctance to part with authoritative and universal narratives that describe the region as a heterogeneous community: different (and sometimes better) by virtue of its cultural diversity. This logic claims that the Caribbean is a hybrid (and consequently) tolerant community incapable of domestic and deliberate attempts of racial or ethnic purification, because it was formed as the result of violent and oppressive colonial impositions. If there have been instances of ethnic or racial intolerance, these acts are explained as exceptions justified by the excessive influence of other nations that historically have been known for their efforts to impose “their” truths on others by political control or other means.

**Power Relations in the Caribbean and the Tradition of Resistance**

A main premise of my dissertation refers to the flexible and transnational realities of the Caribbean as one of its most defining traits. The term “transnational” was first used by Randolph Bourne, an American progressive writer and leftist intellectual, in order to challenge the strong nationalist feelings against immigrants during World War I. Bourne was a strong proponent of cosmopolitanism, which he saw as a moral and ethical ideal to strive for. In his essay “Transnational America,” published July 1916 in *Atlantic Monthly*, Bourne explains America as:

(…) a cosmopolitan federation of national colonies, of foreign cultures, from whom the sting of devastating competition has been removed. America is already the world-federation in miniature, the continent where for the first time in history has been achieved that miracle of hope, the peaceful living side by side, with character substantially preserved, of the most heterogeneous peoples under the sun.”

[9]
While Bourne’s proposal is optimistic, it is also framed within the specific context of “the great American democratic experiment” and how it would ultimately influence the world for good. As a pacifist seeking to foster cultural understanding in a world torn by World War I, we can better understand why many, even to this day, would consider Bourne’s ideas naïve and simplistic. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Bourne was among the first American intellectuals to defy the idea of “Americanization” as the forced imposition of certain cultural values (such as Anglo-Saxonism) over others. Instead, he asserted the importance of respecting and embracing the dynamics brought forth by different immigrant communities, in all their imperceptible gradations, as a way to enrich any given country.

In the modern usage of the word, “transnationalism” is often used interchangeably with globalization, as it refers to the economic processes among nations and their social significance for all the parts involved. I argue that the modern usage of the term grew out of the critical failure of cosmopolitanism to address the fundamental inequalities that still prevail among inclusive moral, economic and/or political relationships between nations or individuals of different nations. Furthermore, “transnationalism” is often used by scholars as a critical approach to the values of cosmopolitanism by acknowledging the social, cultural and ethical implications of what makes the members of any given community different, without giving up on the possibility of creating meaningful and everlasting relations based on mutual respect and growth. This can only be achieved by what Paul Gilroy describes as “the methodical cultivation of a degree of estrangement from one’s own culture and history,” especially in turbulent political climates (Postcolonial Melancholia 2005, 67). In this sense, when I write about the “transnational” realities of the Caribbean, I’m referring to the continuous flow of people, ideas
and goods, their practical, ethical and social implications and, how these dynamics inform the regions in which they take place despite being also the origin of everlasting conflicts and feuds.

In underscoring the transnational realities of the Caribbean, I intend to question prevailing ideas about the overarching experience of colonialism in the formation of Caribbean cultural discourses of identity. By this I mean that scholars concerned with maintaining an aura of “Caribbean legitimacy” rarely address power as a domestic discourse, and if they do, these discussions rarely transcend national boundaries. The invisibility of Caribbean cross-regional allegiances and inheritances with their former colonizers is seldom acknowledged by scholars unless they refer to the negative aspects of such exchanges. Whereas it’s easier for scholars to acknowledge transatlantic exchanges of material commodities, there is a general reluctance to recognize ideological or intellectual exchanges at the same level or capacity from all the parts involved in these dynamics. The emphasis on locations rather than connections helps validate larger ideological discourses of dispossession that do not attend to the complexities of Caribbean experiences. This is aggravated by the exclusion of Caribbean subjects living elsewhere—the so called diaspora—from making meaningful contributions to Caribbean popular discourse because of where they live. These exclusions deprive us of an honest and critical discussion concerning the overall state of Caribbean cultures.

Scholars are nowadays exploring the reasons why colonial experiences surpass transnational exchanges in the formation of Caribbean discourses of identity. Guillermina de Ferrari, for example, explains it from a modernist sensibility that privileges the trope of nature as a way to reconstruct and validate memory. For her, this modernist sensibility (embedded in the works of Edouard Glissant, Aimé Césaire, Alejo Carpentier and Derek Walcott) is related to the Caribbean writers’ need to understand the formation of national literatures “among peoples
whose means of cultural self-representation result exclusively from relations produced by conquest” (Vulnerable States, 3). Thus, colonial dynamics overpower human history and become fundamental notions to understand Caribbean identity.

Another possibility refers to how the Caribbean experience becomes part of the Latin American ideological landscape: reduced and determined by its historical and geographical contexts rather than by its transnational exchanges. While the romantic ideals that belonged to Latin American foundational narratives resulted from similar European processes of conquest and colonization throughout the Americas—an argument that, Doris Sommer demonstrates in her book Foundational Fictions—many Caribbean writers, especially those who live outside the geographical Caribbean, have started to challenge these presumptions in their fictional work. To do so, they emphasize a Caribbean discursive tradition that speaks to the transnational exchanges typical and constituent of the region.

I decided against the use of the word “diaspora” because too often this word suggests a one-directional relationship that does not account for the cultural contributions of individuals living outside of the geographical Caribbean and interacting in multiple social contexts. I prefer the term “trans Caribbean,” as coined by Holger Henke and Karl-Heinz Magister to describe a space where people of Caribbean origins residing in diasporic communities (are able to negotiate their everyday physical and intellectual movements that lead them to vernacular cultural expressions. These expressions “can no longer simply be regarded as Caribbean Diaspora (thus connoting relative cultural conservation and tradition), but most rightfully be seen as the formation of new hybrids that are equally uneasy when relating to their point of (Caribbean) origin, as they are when relating to their new “home” spaces” (Constructing Vernacular Culture 2008, xvi). I should add that I changed the way Henke and Magister write the word “trans
“Caribbean” to emphasize the hyphenated identities that lead toward these sensibilities; the hyphen being simultaneously an allegorical and textual mark of the differences these authors embody and how those same differences come together.

The use of the term “diaspora,” as I suggested earlier, favors notions of time and space. The ancestral and far away homeland becomes frozen in time through feelings of nostalgia that do not correspond to reality. This ultimately undermines the disorienting effects that I believe to be part of a new Trans-Caribbean poetics. Trans-Caribbean refers to a continuous process of transformation and redefinition, one that can take many forms yet still be meaningful for large communities within and outside specific times and places.

This research analyzes the fictional works of authors who acknowledge and embrace their hyphenated identities and who have been affected, one way or another, by dictatorial regimes in the Caribbean. By assuming their hyphens and their experiences, these authors are able to notice discursive and cultural leanings toward authoritarianism that otherwise might be overlooked. Julia Alvarez for example, explains her writing as “a new consciousness, a new place on the map” that grants her a multicultural perspective to understand the world:

(…) this multicultural perspective is the perspective of some of the most interesting writers of this late twentieth century: Salman Rushdie in London, Michael Ondaatje in Toronto, Maxine Hong Kingston in San Francisco, Seamus Heaney in Boston, Bharati Mukherjee in Berkeley, Marjorie Agosin in Wellesley, Edwidge Danticat in Brooklyn. We’re a mobile world; borders are melting; nationalities are on the move, often for devastating reasons (Something to Declare, 1998).

This privileged position allows Caribbean hyphenated authors to cross geographical, linguistic, narrative and ideological boundaries that depend on cultural discourses of identity. That process leads me to one of the main questions guiding this research, namely, how Caribbean American authors challenge centrifugal glances toward the Caribbean; whether from the perspective of the
perceived outsider (living in the United States) or from the perspective of the perceived insider (living in Latin America and the Caribbean).

My research emphasizes the recent works of Junot Díaz, Edwidge Danticat and Julia Alvarez, particularly narratives that are framed within a Caribbean dictatorial context and which internal dynamics suggest a new Trans-Caribbean poetics. This introduction, which also doubles as my first chapter, provides the reader with a theoretical and discursive overview of where I start in my analysis. Chapter 2, 3 and 4 discuss in detail each one of the authors I work with in relation to some of the four main points that assert the existence of a Trans-Caribbean poetics. Chapter 5 discusses the strategies of disruption each one of these authors use and which are particular to a Trans-Caribbean poetics. The last chapter considers the possible implications of a Trans-Caribbean poetics in a wider American context and plans for future research.

In the second chapter I address the tensions between individualism and collectivism in Latin American and Caribbean discursive tradition. I chose Julia Alvarez’s dictatorial narratives to further explain this idea. I analyze how dictatorial regimes are larger-than-life events that transcend and define the roles of those implied in them, at least, in literary representations of the dictatorship. Julia Alvarez challenges this paradigm when she proposes the individual as the primary unit of reality. In other words, the behavior and decisions of Caribbean individuals are not mere automatic reactions to the regime. Instead these are choices based on each character’s personal experiences and beliefs. Both the individual and the community are re-signified through personal choices as well as through the idea of “wandering families”; that is, a community that remains interconnected by choice rather than by an obligation.

The third chapter examines the function of space in relation to organizing centers of meaning, or their absence. One shared peculiarity of all Trans-Caribbean stories of dictatorship
is that the presence of dictators, or similar figures of power, is not required in order for the story to be told. Edwidge Danticat narratives are particularly useful for illustrating this idea. Like Alvarez before her, Danticat seizes on the idea of the family and its significance in Caribbean cultural discourse in order to understand social and normative roles. The resultant aporia between individuals and their communities, both in the sense of contradiction and gaps, has its corollary in literary representations of Caribbean dictatorships within and outside academic circles. Rather than trying to resolve these impasses, Danticat grants them a place in her narratives as a spatial strategy of resistance that ultimately re-valorizes an aesthetic of fragmentation.

My fourth chapter advances the idea that a “Trans-Caribbean” poetics depends on an aesthetic of fragmentation. The focus of the chapter is Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, a story that, among other things, abandons logo-centric discourse in its attempts to present a Trans-Caribbean sensibility, re-signifying, for instance, a trope like cannibalism, a genre like science fiction and a discipline like mythology (which takes precedence over history, science and religion). The result is a disruption of normative ideas about the Caribbean.

My fifth chapter is on language itself. I analyze how Junot Diaz, Edwidge Danticat and Julia Alvarez disrupt normative uses of language. If the normative use of language (and cultural discourse) can be measured by its textual practices, then Julia Alvarez, Junot Díaz and Edwidge Danticat encourage their readers to reconsider the Caribbean beyond prior linguistic allegiances. All three authors make a conscious decision to interrupt the normal course or unity of linear narratives. To achieve a sense of disruption in their readers, they introduce the use of images, translation practices, code-switching and literary gaps. Furthermore, I suggest that by tracing the use of textual and linguistic disruptions, we can understand how these authors create alternative responses to cultural inscriptions of dictatorial regimes in the Caribbean.
In my conclusion, I describe not only some of the difficulties I encountered in conducting this research but also how I foresee using Trans-Caribbean poetics in the future, its discursive and practical implications.
CHAPTER 2: JULIA ALVAREZ

“Actually, I didn’t invent him, just his character. We know there were 22 little boys but only 21 names are given in the official documents. For me as a novelist it’s a lacuna which I am grateful for. I can invent and imagine that 22nd boy. Why was his name left out? What might have happened to him? I do feel compelled to observe the facts that are out there. Same with the Mirabal sisters in *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Theirs was a nation’s history, so I didn’t feel like I could really bend things. But fiction is thankfully more interested in character, the truth according to character. Which gives you lots of wiggle room.”

Julia Alvarez

In most dictatorial narratives, dictatorships are larger-than-life events that define and polarize the roles of the characters within the story. The characters in these narratives assume an identity that emphasizes group-oriented goals as they react and resist the dictator’s power. Meanwhile, dictatorial regimes are viewed only in terms of the person of the dictator, isolated as the sole source of oppression. These characterizations rely on collective or individualist interpretations of national identity that transcends the particularities of any given dictatorship. Julia Alvarez’s dictatorial narratives emphasize characters that shift away from general philosophical and social stances in order to assert their own experiences as the primary unit of reality in their context. Characters are not used as allegories of national identities; on the contrary, they shed light on common practices of cultural disenfranchisement.

**The Need for Trans-Caribbean Individualisms**

Julia Alvarez stands out from other authors discussed in this dissertation for several reasons. She is older. She has published more works. Her career has been longer. She was among the first authors to address contemporary Caribbean dictatorships (and power dynamics) from a transnational perspective. In doing so, she jump-started the discussion regarding Trans-Caribbean dynamics of power in narrative form and paved the ground for other Caribbean
authors (such as Junot Díaz and Edwidge Danticat) concerned with the transnational
transcendence of otherwise barely acknowledged Caribbean authoritarian regimes.

Julia Alvarez is, in addition, the only author born outside the geographical Caribbean, as a result of Trujillo’s dictatorial regime. She was born in 1950 in New York City, where her parents had settled, trying for the first time to live outside of Trujillo’s governing influence. Three months later, her family returned to Dominican soil. The family remained there for ten years, until Alvarez’s father became involved in the efforts to oust Trujillo, and they were forced to flee the country. These moves, typical of the Caribbean region, and to which Alvarez’s constantly refers to in her stories, put her in a very difficult position. As she explains in her biographical essay “Doña Aída, with Your Permission”:

“It’s a world formed of contradictions, clashes, cominglings [sic] tension and richness that interests me. Being in and out of both worlds, looking at one side from the other side—thus the title of one of my books of poems, The Other Side/El Otro Lado. These unusual perspectives are often what I write about. A duality that I hope in the writing transcends itself and becomes a new consciousness, a new place on the map, a synthesizing way of looking at the world (Something, 173).

The duality to which Julia Álvarez refers to is what makes her assert her hyphenated identity as a Dominican-American. Although she makes it clear that she considers herself to be a US Latina writer, she criticizes how this label becomes restrictive and confining: mainstream Americans consider her a writer of ethnic or sociological interest from and for specific groups. Likewise Dominicans in the island criticize her for not being “Dominican enough” (Something, 174). The part that makes Julia Alvarez relevant to my overall argument is how she uses her Caribbean consciousness to escape the confining roles to which she is continuously assigned by others:
“So what are you doing here in Santo Domingo?” You ask me, Doña Aída. To know who I am, I have to know where I come from. So I keep coming back to the Island. And for fuerza, I go back to this thought: it really is in my Caribbean roots, in my island genes to be a pan-American, a gringa-dominicana, a synthesizing consciousness” (Something, 175).

All three authors studied in this dissertation share the same Trans-Caribbean concern with past dictatorial regimes and their lingering cultural effects. They argue that the dictatorial regimes are much more than the ruling of a despot in a specific time period. In fact, they share a tendency to denounce the popular and definite interpretations of dictatorial regimes as a way to mask the authoritarian tendencies embedded in Caribbean culture. In particular, Julia Alvarez elaborates on this idea in the introduction to the recently published memories³ of the only surviving Mirabal sister, Bélgica Adela “Dedé” Mirabal:

“Los treinta y un años de la dictadura trujillista fueron los más oscuros de nuestra historia. Después de su muerte, Trujillo siguió vivo en muchos de sus seguidores, en los largos años de corrupción y de “dictadura democrática” que le han sucedido, y en las desgracias que continúan plagando nuestra historia sin que se las reconozca del todo. Somos ciudadanos con aspiraciones, luchando por comprender qué nos ha sucedido, tratando de alcanzar la nobleza que hay en nosotros a pesar de las fuerzas malditas que nos tiran hacia el fondo del trujillismo sin Trujillo, y a pesar del profundo pozo de la corrupción que traiciona la confianza pública” (14).

[The darkest years in our history where the thirty-one years of the trujillista’s dictatorship. After his death, Trujillo was kept alive by many of his followers, during the long years of corruption and democratic dictatorship that followed, and in the misfortunes that continue to plague our history. Unacknowledged. We are citizens with aspirations, struggling to understand what has happened, trying to reach the nobility within us in spite of the damned forces that throw us into the depths of trujillismo without Trujillo, and despite the deep pit of corruption that betrays public trust] (My translation).

Thus, Alvarez’s stories denounce Trujillo’s regime as a collective effort by the people themselves to blame everything on the dictator only, rather than acknowledging their own possible complicity in the dictatorship as a social reality. The result is the acceptance of an

⁴ Spanish translation of Julia Álvarez’s introduction made by Minou Tavaréz Mirabal
authoritarian discourse leading to what she calls “democratic dictatorships.” Democratic dictatorships, which are at the argumentative core of Trans-Caribbean dictatorial narratives, permit the existence of presidential figures that provide the veneer of legality to institutional practices of dictatorial authoritarianism and oppression. Daniel Fignole, Antonio Thrasybule Kebreau and Clement Barbot are examples of such figures in Haiti, while in the Dominican Republic Jacinto Peynado, Manuel Troncoso de la Concha, Hector Trujillo and the infamous Joaquín Balaguer are the main examples of democratically elected dictators. Alvarez observes that many of the contemporary struggles in Dominican history can be tied to dictatorial power dynamics that are still in place.

To undermine the discourse of collective authoritarianism, authors like Julia Alvarez insist that their characters are people who pursue their particular feelings, beliefs and desires amidst heavily-coded socio-historical circumstances or charted landscapes, whether those circumstances occur within or outside the geographical Caribbean. By focusing on individual characters rather than on social circumstances, Alvarez is able to address the cultural sources of oppression and violence. What makes these stories particularly Trans-Caribbean is that the characters carry out their actions and experiences across national borders because they assume the Caribbean existing “at the crossroads of multifaceted networks of mobility, formed by the

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5 The organizer and self-proclaimed leader of Duvalier’s private militia (the Tonton Macoutes), Clement Barbot took charge of the government after François Duvalier suffered a massive heart attack on May 24, 1959. He was later charged with trying to supplant Duvalier’s presidency and was imprisoned until 1963. After his release, Barbot plotted against Duvalier, even trying (unsuccessfully) to kidnap his children from school. In July 1963 Barbot was captured and shot by the same militia he helped create.

6 Balaguer, who was democratically elected three times, has been denounced by some Dominican scholars as being even more repressive than Trujillo.

7 In “A Conversation with Julia Alvarez” included in Before We Were Free, Alvarez refers to the challenge of writing about stories that have been charted by their landscapes: “Certainly, knowing the general landscape of what has happened gives you a story that has already somehow been charted. The challenge becomes how to tell the story within that charted landscape. But in a story that is mostly fictionalized, you have to map out that landscape in your head.”
material and symbolic travels of both people and things, and by those people and things which
do not move” (Sheller 2006, 6).

These mobility networks are common to Caribbean culture. Julia Alvarez’s strong ties to
the United States are a case in point. In the Dominican Republic, Alvarez attended an American
school, read and spoke in English most of the time, befriended American children, dressed and
ate like an American. Her maternal grandfather was a cultural attaché to the United Nations and
she had many uncles who attended Ivy League colleges in the United States. In an early essay
published in The American Scholar, entitled “An American Childhood in the Dominican
Republic,” Alvarez claims that due to the long-standing ties her family had with the United
States, her father was granted a safe way out of the Dominican Republic and spared the
consequences of opposing Trujillo’s regime. Likewise, in her stories, international or foreign
discourses often interrupt the local discourse of institutionalized oppression and violence.

Julia Alvarez organizes her stories in such a way as to challenge the silencing effects of
dominant discourses of power. Her stories always present different perspectives, competing
voices and traditions, all fragments of a greater whole. Furthermore, characters are central for
the development of each story:

When you write a novel you have to remember that you are telling the truth
according to your characters. So I write according to what a character might have
known, the things that, as in the case of the Butterflies, they might have
perceived, the things that were likely to have happened to them, or the ways they
might have reacted (Garcia Tabor and Sirias 2000, 153).

The accomplished individuality of her characters emerges, in many cases, from her own
biographical circumstances. Julia Alvarez has asserted many times that writing came as a result
of trying to adapt to her new surroundings when her family moved to the United States.

“Classroom English heavily laced with Spanish did not prepare me for the ‘barbaric yawp’ of
American English” (www.juliaalvarez.com/about) and certainly did little to counter the cruel taunts and insults of her classmates. She tried hard to overcome her Spanish accent and found a new solace in books, all of this while her familial relations suffered drastic changes due to her enrollment in a boarding school at thirteen years old and the summers she spent in the Dominican Republic in order not to lose touch with her culture. It was during those summers that Alvarez’s started noticing the stark contrasts between her life in the United States and her life in the Dominican Republic.

Few people know that Julia Alvarez started her career writing poetry. While she attended Connecticut College, she won the Benjamin T. Marshal Poetry Prize. She then attended the Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont and transferred afterwards to Middlebury College, where she received a Bachelor of Arts in English. Alvarez then enrolled in Syracuse University where she received a master’s degree in creative writing. Her first book of poetry, Homecoming (1984), had a very limited distribution. In the afterword for the second edition, Julia Alvarez recalls her anxiety at being a newly published author: how she wanted to buy all the copies before anyone could read it and “how terrified we women were in the not so long ago past to have public voices.” (www.juliaalvarez.com/poetry) Alvarez has published only two additional poetry books: The Other Side/El Otro Lado (1995) and The Woman I kept to myself (2004).

After college Alvarez developed a modest writing career while holding various teaching jobs in Kentucky, California, Delaware, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Washington, D.C., and even at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In 1988 she accepted a teaching position at Middlebury College, where she has settled permanently. Meanwhile her poems and a few short stories earned her honors, among them a National Endowment for the Arts grant and the General Electric Foundation Award for Young Writers. This last award would lead Alvarez
to sign a contract for her first novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991). For the novel Alvarez would draw from her experiences growing up in the United States and spending her summers in the Dominican Republic.

For Julia Alvarez, individualism does not preclude a sense of collective solidarity or community. In most of her stories, she sides with those individuals who are silenced by collective experiences, whether those experiences come from the oppressors or from the oppressed. Louis Parkinson Zamora sums up these types of dynamics very well when she describes the literary energy of the New World Project as one “directed first toward the imperatives of communal self-definition and second toward the urge for individual self-expression” (*The Usable Past* 1997, 198). Zamora then argues that individuated histories are possible through the identification or creation of a “usable communal past.” While Alvarez shares Zamora’s sense of narrative pragmatism, especially as they both turn away from “archetypalized characters driven by collective histories rather than individual personality” (198), she seems more suspicious of the ideological reasons behind these representations. She has warned her readers about the “god-making impulse” that deifies historical characters and that makes them impossible to emulate in a real context, which in turn, advocates for the status quo so coveted by dictatorial and authoritarian regimes. In her stories, Julia Alvarez emphasizes the human and private side of her characters making them more accessible and real:

> In addition, though I had researched the facts of the regime, and events pertaining to Trujillo’s thirty-one-year despotism, I sometimes took liberties—by changing dates, by reconstructing events, and by collapsing characters or incidents. For I wanted to immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that I believe can only be finally understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination. A novel is not, after all, a historical document, but a way to travel through the human heart (*In the Time* “Postcript” 324).
The importance of childhood in Alvarez’s stories goes hand in hand with the idea of the disenfranchised in Caribbean dictatorial regimes. While Alvarez has been praised for her realistic and sound portrayal of complex female characters that are in many times rescued from the history annals, critics have paid much less attention to her increasing use of children as main characters. In my next section I explore how Alvarez’s narratives for young readers of all ages challenge the normative characterizations of power that sustain traditional dictatorial narratives.

**The Silenced in Caribbean Dictatorial Narratives**

As a writer Julia Alvarez has dedicated a substantial amount of her narratives to “young readers of all ages” (the phrase the author prefers to “children’s books” or “juvenile literature”). Nine out of nineteen titles, all of them published within this decade, are specifically for children. Three of these are picture books: *The Secret Footprints* (2000); *A Gift of Gracias: The Legend of Altagracia* (2005) and *The Best Gift of All: The Legend of La Vieja Belén/El mejor regalo de todos: la leyenda de la vieja Belén* (2008). *When Tia Lola came to visit stay* (2001), *A Cafecito Story* (2001), *Before We Were Free* (2002), *Finding Miracles* (2004), *Return to Sender* (2009) and *How Tia Lola Learned to Teach* (forthcoming 2010) are longer narratives. Although these titles are identified as children’s books on her website, the theme of childhood appears frequently in her work in general, with most of her characters (if not all) portrayed as children or reminiscing about childhood. I believe that childhood is important in Julia Alvarez’s stories because it becomes a viable way to interpret dictatorial regimes outside of conventional perspectives.

But why children? In her introduction to *Stolen Voices: Young People’s War Diaries from World War I to Iraq* (2006), Melanie Challenger answers this question through the story of Anne Frank, who died in “complete anonymity, stripped by the Nazi government of individuality
and rendered as nothing more than one of six million Jewish men, women, and children put to
death during the Holocaust” (XVII), except for her diary which refuted this. Thus, through her
diary, Anne Frank was able to transcend the socio-historical circumstances that defined her as a
Jew and recover her individuality. As Challenger explains later on, Anne Frank’s diary helps to
counter the power exerted by the nation-states that “rely upon writing to make their violent intent
concrete, writing laws that are imposed upon others, hampering their lives” (XVIII). The
musings of a teenage girl are powerful because she reveals the complex details of a life
unsuspected and overlooked by everyone, which ultimately makes her story prevail against all
odds. If she had written her diary as an adult, it would not have had as great an effect.

Julia Alvarez also uses Anne Frank as a model to speak against repression. In the book
Before We Were Free, which won her the Pura Belpre Award\textsuperscript{8} in 2004, her main character is
modeled after Anne Frank, and even bears the same name (Ana). Alvarez stated that she
“wanted to write the story of our Anne Frank on this side of the Atlantic” (Before We Were Free:
A conversation, 175). Although Anne Frank’s honest portrayal of her personal life is considered
to be among the most important literary testimonies of our century, there are many children who
like Anne, have lived or are living under conditions of extreme violence and cultural oppression,
however, their age and lack of power renders them invisible. In her acceptance speech for the
award mentioned earlier, Alvarez further comments on the relationship between children’s
literature and political awareness:

As I turned my attention to the literature of young adults, I became interested in
books with a political content to them. I found many wonderful books on the
Holocaust (beginning of course, with the diary of Anne Frank. She was a big
influence on my character Anita), wonderful books on slavery, on Native

\textsuperscript{8} Established in 1996, The Pura Belpre Award is presented to a Latino/Latina writer and illustrator whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latino cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth. Julia Álvarez has received the award in two occasions: one for Before We Were Free and the most recent (2010) for Return to Sender.
Americans, but I found very few titles—and we have a good collection at my local Ilsley library in Middlebury—that addressed what were the “holocausts” on our side of the Atlantic in the second half of the last century (We Need to Understand 2004).

As a writer, Julia Alvarez has demonstrated her commitment to address normative cultural silences both within and beyond the Caribbean. She was the first to write about the Mirabal Sisters in *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994). Five years after its publication, the United Nations declared November 25th (the day of their deaths) to be the International Day against the Violence against Women. She is recognized as one of the first and main voices of the Latina (or Latin American) experience in the United States. Likewise, many scholars attest to her importance in Latin American letters (although many others do so reluctantly). In her article “Tell Us!”: *Before We Were Free* and Julia Alvarez’s Testimonial Cycle” (*Antípodas* 2009, 141-156), Jessica Wells Canutillo identifies at least five different scholars that have analyzed *In the Time of the Butterflies* in terms of the Latin American testimonio tradition. She then also places *Before We Were Free* within that testimonio tradition. Recently Alvarez addressed the precarious condition of children of Mexican migrant workers in her novel *Return to Sender* (2009) as well as the unknown story of the Balmis Expedition, the first world-wide effort to eradicate a deadly disease (chickenpox) which used orphan children as incubators of the live vaccine. This way of storytelling is not exempt of risks, as she elaborates in a recent interview:

There is a prohibition on taking stories outside the community. It’s very tribal. An understanding that stories are powerful. That to know someone’s story is a privilege and a power. And so our communities, which often already feel marginal and powerless, respond negatively to this kind of exposé—what feels like an exposé to them. I read how this happened to Maxine Hong Kingston with the Chinese American community after [*The/Woman Warrior*. And I guess a similar thing happened to Edwidge with *Breath, Eyes and [sic] Memories* with the Haitian community (Birnbaum).
By using children as characters, Julia Alvarez adds another dimension to her argument against the myth of political and social disengagement often ascribed to Trans-Caribbean authors. Children are not citizens. They don’t vote or fight nor are they aware of their political rights and obligations, except when told by someone else. Yet they remain victims of armed conflict, both as targets and increasingly as its instruments, according to the United Nation’s Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (See United Nations, http://www.un.org/children/conflict/english/issues.html). Julia Alvarez makes similar statements in an interview included in Before We Were Free:

We often think of the victims of oppression as the actual martyrs and heroes—grown men and women who might form part of a freedom-fighting group or who are forced into hiding. But there are invisible victims and casualties: the children who are growing up in these terrifying and violent situations, who are robbed of their childhood. They don’t ever get the opportunity to be children, to be nurtured, to have faith in freedom and trust in goodness, to enjoy that innocent sense of possibility and promise. And, of course, many of these children endure immediate losses: fatherless and motherless and auntless and uncleless children left behind when we destroy families, the fabric of a society (Before We Were Free, 175).

Furthermore, Julia Alvarez’s characters often highlight the unnoticed parallels between children and other individuals that are excluded from the discussion of Caribbean dictatorial regimes. These exclusions obey cultural assumptions that remain deeply popular and embedded in daily life. Thus they become invisible. The invisibility of these cultural assumptions, however, does not make them any less political, which is ultimately Julia Alvarez’s main argument.

Indeed, Julia Alvarez’s incursion into children’s literature came about as a result of the literacy needs the author and her husband, Bill Eichner, noticed on their sustainable coffee farm in the Dominican Republic. Alvarez and Eichner realized that “no one in the community of small farmers knew how to read or write, not the old people, not the middle-agers, not their children, not even the mayor and authorities” (Interview with the author in Finding Miracles, 8).
Therefore, they decided to broaden the social scope of their original project and include a school on the farm premises. As part of her literacy project on the farm, Alvarez started reading books to the children. But she noticed that these “simple straightforward stories” and “eye-catching pictures” were culturally irrelevant to the children and their families. Many of these stories were translations of books written originally in English “about USA experiences,” which coaxed her into writing:

“I thought; why not write stories based on old legends popular among my neighbors: And so I wrote The Secret Footprints about a tribe of women, ciguapas who come out at night to hunt for food. Most recently I wrote A Gift of Gracias: The Legend of Altagracia about the Virgencita Altagracia after whom our farm project: Finca-Fundación (Farm-Foundation) Alta Gracia is named (Interview with the author in Finding Miracles 8).

Alvarez addresses the literacy and cultural needs of her readers simultaneously. In doing so, she becomes a writer concerned with communities rarely acknowledged by others, whether these communities are formed by children, illiterate campesino farmers, women, or US Caribbean migrants. All of them become common subjects in her stories and part of the grand narrative she wants to create about life under dictatorial regimes.

Distinct from her Latin American counterparts, Julia Alvarez, like many other Trans-Caribbean writers, struggles to demonstrate in her stories the embedded cultural patterns of authoritarianism that transcend any given dictatorial regime. The classic dictator novel mostly accounts for the story of those living directly within the regime’s scope, either as victims or perpetrators. As such, these stories are circumscribed by the dictatorship as the main event. Timelines, places and significant well-known moments become fundamental in telling the story of the dictatorship. In addition, it is important to note that while most Latin American and Caribbean scholars are willing to discuss the relationship between history, power and literature, few have addressed how these discussions help secure a discursive canon that informs notions of
cultural identity. As such, the dictator novel provides scholars with the means to discuss the relationship between power and writing, even when those same discussions outlast and transcend their original geo-political and historical contexts. The dictator novel is closely related to a poetics of history because it validates the most common presumptions of the regime through what Pedro San Miguel identifies as a “Gordian knot” made up of notions of identity that have been “codified” as “moments” in the constitution of a national and state “essence” (La Isla Imaginada 1997,21). In his analysis, San Miguel maintains that the relationship between power, history and literature is fundamental to creating notions of identity that transcend the fall of a regime and which become critical in the attempt both to delimit power and to create national utopias.

Julia Álvarez does not strive after such theoretical abstractions. She is committed to her characters and what they have to say about the dictatorship in relation to their lives rather than to specific notions of identity that validate a story. In other words, the characters make the story not the other way around. Julia Álvarez’s commitment to her characters is intrinsically tied to her ideas on how fiction relates to history and vice versa. While fiction is a recurrent motif in Trans-Caribbean narratives (as I will argue later in this thesis) the value of Latin American and Caribbean narratives often depends on whether a story is truthful to its socio-historical circumstance or not. This paradigm, sustained by many reputable scholars such as Roberto González-Echevarría, Ana Gallego Cuñias, and Ignacio López-Calvo, is grounded on very narrow assumptions of identity that mark the authors, and their stories, as Caribbean, Latin American, Latina/o or Black (among many other categories). Each one of these labels conveys a

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10 Ignacio López-Calvo, “A Postmodern Plátano’s Trujillo: Junot Diaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, more Macondo than McOndo,” in Antipodas: Journal of Hispanic and Galician Studies XX, (2009), pp. 75-90
different set of ideological and political expectations that are used for or against the author. The conscious decision of these writers to live outside the geographical Caribbean, write in a different language, and becoming critical of the socio-political realities of the Caribbean, “from the outside,” is often characterized as selfishness, which is of course contrary to a Latin American/Caribbean social standpoint. Roberto González Echevarría exemplifies this type of critical judgment in his review of *In the Time of the Butterflies*, when, among other things, he complains of her English marred by Hispanisms. He also complains that the Mirabal sisters as portrayed by Julia Alvarez, lack “any deeply felt or intellectually justified commitment” to be drawn to politics. He closes by saying that “the gringa dominicana would never really be able to understand the other woman, much less translate her” (New York Times, 12/18/1994).

The paradigm exemplified by González-Echevarría is one held by many Latin Americanists who believe Latino or “Hispanic narratives in the United States” to be compelling only from an assimilative perspective; that is, valuable only as they tell the struggles of people trying to assimilate to the United States culture. In asserting his position, González-Echevarría does not consider the typical mobilities of the Caribbean region as one of its most determining features.

To counteract these assumptions, Julia Alvarez proposes a different relation between fiction and history; one that helps her maneuver the “charted landscapes” created through the commonplaces of collective memory. For her stories are deeply connected to her characters and their personal truths. Because historical narratives are always master narratives in which a leading voice or story takes over others, fiction becomes an effective way to reconcile what until now seemed impossible, that is, history and its characters. It is important to note that in order to achieve this, fiction needs to transcend the restrictions of form and genre:
That’s what I think fiction can help us do. It provides a way to emotionally integrate and make sense of this mysterious world through story and character. That’s why I appreciate fiction that lets more in. That’s why I don’t like fantasy fiction or specialized fiction. I don’t want gated communities when I read novels [...] So I agree with Milosz’s observation that good poems, good stories, must have a certain level of awareness to be of value to the people we are writing for in our own time and down the line to others in the future. So you have Milton writing about *Paradise Lost* but he is totally aware of 17th century British politics—it’s there. We go to fiction that has that level of awareness in part to help us integrate things (Birnbaum).

Children’s literature help advance Alvarez’s use of fiction by broadening the discussion of dictatorial regimes beyond the scope of a normative genre (the dictator novel). Robyn McCallum and John Stephens argue that children’s literature provides a cultural narrative schema that expresses “significant and universal human experiences, interlinks truth and cultural heritage, and rests moral judgments within an ethical dimension” (*Retelling Stories, Framing Culture* 1998, 7). This is proven by the fact that children’s literature has a larger proportion of retold stories when compared with general literature. These retellings may be understood as the embedded cultural patterns and ideologies that maintain society’s status quo. In this sense, children dictatorial narratives may be more helpful to identify and disclose cultural authoritarianism that their adult counterparts.

What I would like to consider first in light of these arguments is how Julia Alvarez’s dictatorial narratives for young readers of all ages, *Finding Miracles* and *Before We Were Free* disclose such cultural patterns. Both novels, I argue, question a literary canon that codifies the social and individual responses to dictatorial regimes through narrative, while keeping enough of the metanarrative for the reader to know where the story is coming from. I, then, broaden my analysis to include Alvarez’s overall treatment of childhood in other narratives that grapple with the issue of dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, such as *In the Time of the Butterflies*, *In The Name of Salomé* and even some of Alvarez’s essays and poems.
Because the dictator novel has an almost canonical claim in Latin American and Caribbean literature, Alvarez’s stories for young readers of all ages defy codified literary responses toward dictatorial regimes. *Before We Were Free* and *Finding Miracles* exemplify Stephen and McCallum’s cultural narrative schemas by presenting the reader with two popular retellings of the traditional dictator story. Each story accounts for a different version of what it means to live under the ideological influence of a dictatorial regime. In *Before We Were Free*, as was the case in a prior novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, the dictatorship is told from the perspective of those living directly within it. *Finding Miracles* similar to other narratives such as *How the García Girls lost their Accents* and *In the Name of Salomé* tell the story of those who are still experiencing the long-term cultural consequences of dictatorial and authoritarian regimes, despite being removed from their circumstances.

While each perspective presented in the stories is unique and different in how it portrays and perceives social and cultural repression; these perspectives are not mutually exclusive as they were in the past, but in fact build on each other. These continuities are demonstrated in different ways. One of the most basic ones is that the characters in *Before We Were Free* are the family left behind by the García girls in *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents*. To make this continuity among narratives even more pronounced, *Before We Were Free* is written “for those who stayed,” as Alvarez states in its dedication. In fact, in her acceptance speech for the Pura Belpre Award, Alvarez explains that with *Before We Were Free* she is bearing witness to her uncle’s involvement in the plot against the dictator. While her uncle was one of the few who survived imprisonment during the regime, his dream was to co-write with Alvarez a book entitled *I Learned More in Jail than at Yale*. Alvarez’s uncle died before they could undertake
this joint project. Nevertheless, with the help of her uncle’s son, some of her family’s own memories found their way into the book.

Alvarez makes sure to contextualize the story within a transnational frame. Anita and her family have multiple ties with other countries and experiences. Anita’s friend, Oscar, who is half-Dominican and half-Italian, is one of the few kids in her class to call attention to the American embargo of the Dominican Republic, thus raising a historical awareness among his peers. There are references to the Organization of American States (OAS) and its role in investigating human right abuses by the secret police (SIM); the failed attempt against the life of Venezuelan President Rómulo Betancourt on behalf of Trujillo and the many attempts on Trujillo’s life covertly supported by the United States.

The tension between geographical and cultural contexts affected by dictatorial regimes becomes a trademark in Julia Alvarez’s narratives, which includes the transnational Caribbean within the discursive tradition of both the United States and Latin America. In *Finding Miracles*, for example, the main character (Milagros) feels the need to confront the truth about her identity as an adopted child from a country with a brutal history of dictatorship, despite only knowing a safe life in Vermont. Milly and her family travel back and forth trying to make sense of a reality that only accepts one version of the story and along the way she learns to arrive at her own conclusions. Similarly, *In the Name of Salomé* provides the reader with the intimate reality of multiple displacements in one family whose history is deeply connected with the national discourses of the Dominican Republic. While Salomé Ureña struggles to transcend form (her poetry) and assert experience (her private life as a woman), her daughter Camila Henríquez Ureña tries to make sense of her very private life (experiences) within the context of the national discourse (form) her mother helped to articulate in the Dominican Republic through her poetry.
Camila’s struggle leads her to join the Cuban Revolution at the age of sixty. It is important to notice that although she joins the Cuban Revolution because she is attracted by its allegorical meaning in relation to what she perceives is her mother’s legacy, at the end of the novel she is able to transcend the rhetoric, form and characters that compose Caribbean cultural discourses used (to this day) to promote exclusion. In the Epilogue to the story entitled: “Arriving Santo Domingo: September 1973” there are many examples of this transcendence. At one point during the story, when Camila talks with her nieces, she explains to them how language (and discourse) is used to maintain authoritarianism: ‘If there is one thing I hate about revolution,’ I add, and of course, they perk up hearing me say this, as they so much want their old aunt to agree with their points of view, ‘it is the sloppy use of the language’ (344). Later, Camila adds:

“It was happening all over Cuba, this awful, overwrought language. Every time I ventured out I would have to fight an urge to take my red pencil. One shopkeeper posted, “the customer is always right except when he attacks the revolution.” Both false statements: one of capitalism, the second of Marxism. Oh dear, I thought, what have I come back to? (345).

Earlier in the same Epilogue, Camila has shown how characters tend to embody these same predicaments; by making a “sacrilegious prayer” that demonstrates Trans-Caribbean connections:

The struggle to see and the struggle to love the flawed thing we see—what other struggle is there? Even the struggle to create a country comes out of that same seed.
In the name of Hostos, Salomé, José Martí…
“I am indeed surprised,” Rodolfo was saying playfully. He had caught his agnostic sister making the sign of the cross. Of course, he had not heard my sacrilegious prayer (339).

National characters that are used to build a sense of cultural identity tend to generate the same dogmatic beliefs that are exercised in religious faith. Camila replaces the figures of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and the Holy Spirit) with Eugenio María de Hostos (Puerto Rican),
Salome Ureña (Dominican) and Jose Martí (Cuban), all of them essential figures of the Spanish Caribbean thought. In her agnostic prayer Camila defies the blind faith that accompanies these figures (the struggle to see) as well as how hard it is to appreciate what they did, even when they too committed mistakes (the struggle to love the flawed thing we see). It is interesting to note that even when these figures are still controversial, they were some of the earliest advocates for an Antillean identity, and that Camila, by including her mother (who is the only woman in the holy triad) changes the normative exclusion of women in the ideological canon of the Caribbean.

In the Epilogue, Camila addresses the idea of “charted landscapes” once more. Having lived in Cuba when she was a child, she explains how ideology charges language which in turn changes the landscape:

The first few years, before I learned the new names, it was impossible for me to travel anywhere by taxi unless I happened upon an older driver. A young driver would not know Calle de la Reina because it had been liberated and renamed Simón Bolivar before he had learned to read. Carlos III Boulevard was gone, but Boulevard Salvador Allende could still take you where you were going. We were at the foot of our very own Tower of Babel, ideological as well as linguistic, and the exodus began, mostly of the rich who had the means to start over in the United States of America (345).

Camila’s charted landscape takes the reader from the Caribbean (Cuba) to Latin America (Simón Bolivar and Salvador Allende) and ends up in the United States, where people with means have the opportunity to start over again (recreating similar dynamics of power). It is important to note that the previous passage summarizes the “Gordian knot” Pedro San Miguel referred too earlier in the chapter, in which codified moments and characters help to delimit power and create national utopias in Caribbean culture.

By referring to and using children in her dictatorial narratives, Julia Alvarez elaborates on the problematic legacies of authoritative regimes in relation to the development of a personal identity. The experience of childhood is similar to the experiences of Caribbean and Latino
individuals trying to achieve a sense of identity amidst mainstream cultural discourses, whether these discourses come from the regime or from its presumed antagonists (the foreigners). In this sense, Ana de la Torre, Camila Ureña and Milly Kaufmann’s experiences are alike, as they all reveal the struggles that come up as Trans-Caribbean subjects assert multiple cultural heritages, traditions and experiences that transcend their socio-historical circumstances and defy the status quo. Furthermore, the dictatorship in these stories loses its central role and becomes instead part of the circumstantial contexts of the narrative itself. That loss of centrality points to a poetics different from that of the traditional Latin American dictator novel.

The Importance of Trans-Caribbean Characters

The reality of dictatorship informs Trans-Caribbean poetics. This is so because power dynamics in the Latin American literary canon are based on the idea of narrative logos, a center that determines everything in the story, from character to plot. Instead, Julia Alvarez’s narrative project is closer to a Caribbean aesthetic represented by the Creolité and Antillanité movements, which not only asserted racial, cultural and linguistic diversity but proposed the absence of an organizing center. In the dictator novel, this organizing center is generally the dictator, whom every other character and the plot itself relate to. Dictatorial narratives that do not follow this format are often classed within the larger spectrum of political fiction, postmodern/post-boom narratives or the New Latin American Novel. Raymond L. Williams, for example, mentions that the 70’s and 80’s saw a rise in political fiction that “did not fall strictly within the genre of dictator novels,” and further explains that the novel of exile “written in Europe or the United States” was a literary “counterpart to the dictator novels in Latin America” (The Twentieth Century Spanish American Novel 2003, 167). He identifies these political fictions as “quasi-dictator novels,” a label that simultaneously asserts the significance of the dictator novel genre
for the Latin American literary canon and somehow perpetuates the myth of political disengagement discussed earlier in this chapter. Williams’ assertions are even more puzzling since later on he describes how the literary climate in Latin America during the 90’s is still paying the political, social and economic costs of the dictatorships of the previous two decades, while leaning toward the “blurring of cultural borders and the emergence of narrative works that play a political role in the cultural sphere”(211). In this particular case Williams only considers South American dictatorial regimes, never once alluding to similar regimes in the Caribbean.

But how do Julia Alvarez’s dictatorial narratives assert an aesthetic of fragmentation while addressing the normative silences of Caribbean cultures? The answer lies in her characters. In Before We Were Free, for example, Julia Alvarez tells the story of Ana de La Torre as a Dominican Anne Frank. Ana, who is twelve years old when the story begins, isn’t aware of the horrors of the dictatorial regime that surround her, even though her immediate family (her father and uncle are actively involved in the efforts to overthrow Trujillo’s rule. When her favorite cousin Carla García (one of the García sisters in Yo and How the García Girls Lost their Accents) undertakes a hasty departure with her family in order to save their lives, Ana gathers strength in a very curious manner:

Mrs. Brown leads Carla up the side of the classroom. I follow; afraid I’ll burst into tears if I catch anyone’s eye. I look up at the portrait of our Benefactor, El Jefe, which hangs above the classroom, his eyes watching over us. To his left hangs George Washington in his white wig, looking off into the distance. Perhaps he is homesick for his own country? Just staring at El Jefe keeps my tears from flowing. I want to be brave and strong, so that someday if I ever meet the leader of our country, he’ll congratulate me. “So, you are the girl who never cries?” he’ll say, smiling down at me (4).

Alvarez makes a good job showing her readers some of the “wrong” cultural discourses that Ana, in her innocence, picks on. While she feels like crying, she wants to show otherwise. Her surroundings tell her to act differently from how she feels; a subtle sign of ideological repression

[37]
that is accentuated when she mentions that she wants to be brave in case she meets Trujillo one
day. It is Ana’s innocence that prevents her from interpreting correctly the coded messages
embedded and hidden everywhere. Hanging portraits and signs openly glorify Trujillo’s national
enterprises; empty but common discourses that conceal the truth the regime. Likewise, she
mentions how George Washington’s portrait, looks as if he was homesick for his own country.
The portrait and Ana’s comment epitomize the inevitability of “foreign” representations in
Trans-Caribbean dynamics. Ironically, George Washington’s portrait reveals much better the
undisclosed feelings of loss that Ana and her immediate family are experiencing.

Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned how Alvarez comments on the prohibition of taking
stories outside of communities that already feel marginal and powerless. This is important
because silence is often regarded as one of the most notable effects of dictatorial repression, yet
Alvarez chooses to highlight how these silences become normative for culture as well. In Before
We Were Free, for example, we are told how, for her parents and siblings, Ana lacks the maturity
to understand the realities of a dictatorial regime. She is advised by her family against asking
many questions and they all try to keep her out of knowing about what is happening around her.
Although Ana’s family encouraged her natural curiosity when she was younger, now they ask
her to keep silent. In doing so, Ana’s family socialize her to occupy a [minor (pun intended) and]
marginal role in the events that take place. In this sense, the family is unknowingly complicit
with the regime, which requires silence and submission from the citizens to maintain the status
quo.

Children are naturally curious about the world that surrounds them. Since dictatorial
regimes are not conducive to inquiry but to blind acceptance, Ana and her siblings have very
strong physical and emotional reactions when they begin to realize what society requires from
them. Lucinda (Ana’s sister) develops a rash in her neck. Mundín (Ana’s brother) starts biting his nails. Ana, nicknamed *cotorrita* “because sometimes I talk too much, like a parrot” (4), begins to erase what she writes in a personal diary she received as a Christmas gift: “I always write with a pencil for a reason. I want to be sure that on a moment’s notice, I can erase what I’ve written. I still have Carla’s huge eraser. With a few strokes back and forth, I can get rid of any evidence if the SIM come to our door” (42).

The huge eraser Ana refers to has the shape of the Dominican Republic and, ironically enough, is the tool that Ana uses to censor her words and thoughts. The Dominican Republic, like the eraser, will change during the dictatorship in unexpected ways for both girls and will never be the same. Carla forgets to take the eraser with her and thus does not know how much the country she left behind changes, having only the reference of a memory lost in time. Ana, however, will not notice that she has an active role in reshaping her country. Through this simple image, Alvarez reminds us that there is more than one way to understand (and represent) dictatorial experiences and that despite the differences among these representations, each experience complements the other.

Ana’s self-censorship has unexpected consequences for her own voice and memory. Ana starts forgetting words: “It doesn’t even have to be an important or hard word like *amnesty* or *communism*, but something easy, like *salt* or *butter* or *sky* or *star*. That makes the forgetfulness even scarier” (80). In fact, when she tries to tell her mother all of her feelings and fears aroused by Lucinda’s departure to New York, the only word that she can remember is *nada* (nothing). Other words or phrases she can’t make herself pronounce are “I AM NOT CRAZY” (79); “I am not strong or brave” (80), “What on earth are you talking about, papi” (80) and “cry” (84). As Ana notices, the words she forgets are those related to daily life and emotions. The fact that “I
“AM NOT CRAZY” is printed in caps in the text suggests that her fear for her sanity is an anguished cry that has been silenced, that cannot be allowed its voice. Furthermore, Ana’s story is detached from the ideological and political consequences of the regime. Her enforced silences take an enormous emotional toll on her. She doubts what she thinks and writes. Nevertheless, just the act of writing—even in a private diary—may be seen as an act of defiance on Ana’s part.

As Roberto Echevarría explains:

The dictator too is supposed to rule through a voice, a “voice” much like that of the author—that is to say, the tics and quirks that make writing his or hers, the marks that identify him or her. For in the end the dictator is shown not to be the bearer of power through voice, but a figure needed to show by his demise the controlling power of writing—it is not the voice, but the writing, it is not the dictator-author, but the secretary writer, who reigns, even if he is nothing but a Carnival king (Echevarría 1985, 77-78).

Ana is a disenfranchised voice, both as a woman and as a child; nevertheless she decides to write despite the grim circumstances around her are. She writes from her own subjective experiences, but most importantly, she doesn’t take anyone or anything for granted. Throughout the story she wonders whether her uncle and her father are taking the right course by plotting against Trujillo’s life. The story seems to imply that her forgetfulness may very well emerge from overhearing the secret meetings to oust Trujillo

Mami looks like the monkey with his hand over his mouth. I don’t know if she’s upset at the news she just heard or at suddenly realizing that I’ve been listening in on the men’s secret meetings for months. She leans over my bed and angles the jalousies open. “Señores,” she calls out, “everything can be heard from this room.”
The gathering goes absolutely silent, and then Papi walks over to the window and peers in over Mami’s shoulder to where I sit on my bed. “No wonder” is all he says (85).

While Ana’s family has been trying to shelter her from the truth, she has overheard everything that goes on. Ana becomes a reluctant witness to her family’s constant deceptions and wonders
whether she is misinterpreting their words or intentions. Form and intention do not necessarily convey the same message:

For the rest of the day, I can’t concentrate on anything. I just can’t believe my own father would do something he’s always taught me is wrong! Maybe saying the king must die was like the metaphors Mrs. Brown was always talking about? A figure of speech, not something that’s actually true (70).

Ana learns that form, intention and experience are different (but complementary) angles in any story. Even in writing her diary entries, she has to decide what to emphasize and what to discard. It is in this way that she discovers her authorial power. Trying not to emulate the normative silences that surround her, Ana calls attention to the ambiguous nature of words (and discourse) and how their use is not exclusive to anyone:

According to Mr. Mancini, loads of people are being arrested. The whole town of Moca was imprisoned because one of the conspirators came from there! El Jefe’s son, Trujillo Junior, says he will not rest until he has punished every man, woman, and child associates with the assassination of his father. Actually, Mr. Mancini says that other people are secretly calling it an ajusticiamiento, which means bringing to justice, the way criminals have to face the consequences of their evil deeds.

I feel so much better thinking that Papi and Tio Toni were doing justice, not really murdering killing hurting someone. But still…just the thought of my own father—“(109).

By mentioning how a whole town is being imprisoned because of one conspirator, Before We Were Free emphasizes the dangers of collective notions of identity that become national utopias; namely being prisoner of ideologies that do not reflect the subjective experiences of “every man, woman and child.” Ana’s next comment considers the shifting power of discourse and words. While Trujillo’s son seeks revenge for what he calls “the assassination of his father,” other people call the same event an “ajusticiamiento.” Ana, whose family is directly implicated in this event, writes about two different versions of the same story, thus her writing is made up of many incongruent fragments that she doesn’t dare to erase. Further on she reveals her doubts in
favoring one version over the other, by writing different words that can be used to describe the role her family has in the plot against Trujillo’s life. Before anything happens, Ana wonders whether her father and uncle are using metaphors to describe their intended actions. Ana’s concern with semantics carries an implicit criticism towards the ideological role of the author amidst dictatorial and repressive experiences. After all, figures of speech are less menacing than real experiences.

In this sense, Before We Were Free reveals most of the textual features Myrna Solotorevsky identifies as typical of fragmentation poetics. In her essay, “Poética de la totalidad y poética de la fragmentación: Borges/Sarduy,” Solotorevsky uses Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges’ story “La escritura del Dios” [The Writing of the God] as an example of totality poetics, which she contrasts with Cuban author Severo Sarduy’s novel “Cobra,” a story that exemplifies fragmentation poetics. These two poetics (and stories) demonstrate the shift between Latin American dictator novels and Trans-Caribbean dictatorial narratives. Solotorevsky contends that the notion of a sacred center, both real and absolute, is the main characteristic of totality poetics. In Latin American dictator novels, at the center or logos are dictators, powerful figures that determine the positioning of every other character in the text. But, fragmentation poetics consist of profane or demystifying stories that lack a center and provide, instead, a constant displacement of meaning. This is akin to Trans-Caribbean dictatorial narratives, which consider Caribbean dictatorship in light of its transnational dynamics. Furthermore, Solotorevsky explains:

Nuestra época postmodernista ha rendido un verdadero culto a la fragmentación; ésta aparece afectando al espacio textual (división en partes, presencia de blancos en la página), al nivel semántico (obstrucción en la captación de significados), al nivel de organización textual (anacronías, analepsis (flashback), prolepsis (flashforward)); al nivel discursivo (fragmentación de lexemas, fracturas sintácticas (Solotorevsky 1995, 274).
Our postmodern epoch worships fragmentation; it affects textual space (division in segments, blank spaces in the page), semantics (obstruction in the collection of meanings), textual organization (anachronisms, racconto (flashbacks), prolepsis (flashforwards)) and discourse (lexemic fragmentation and syntactic fractures) [My translation].

Many if not all of these features are present in Julia Alvarez’s dictatorial narratives. In Before We Were Free, after Trujillo’s body is found in the trunk of the family car, metaphors become real for Ana. She questions her family’s actions and holds doubts about what she knows. Ironically, now that the danger is real, she writes everything that goes through her head. Key words such as “murdering” and “killing” are struck through, yet they remain on the page, to bear witness to what Ana knows and feels. These words are, nevertheless, softened by the word “hurting,” that obstructs the comprehension of (historical) meaning. Because she never finishes her sentence (and thoughts) regarding the matter, the reader can’t be sure of Ana’s position. Is Ana really feeling better? Can she justify her family’s actions?

Against Heroes and Other Fundamental Lies

Alvarez shifts her attention from quintessential characters and extraordinary circumstances to subjective characters and daily life. Her stories transcend “moments” and “characters” that define and create utopian notions of cultural identity. “Moments,” in this case, means the particular socio-historical and geographical events that assert or modify a presumed national [and collective] identity. Examples of such moments are The Holocaust, World Wars I and II, and of course the Trujillo dictatorship. By “characters” I mean figures of power that somehow embody the collective hopes and fears of the masses in times of a national leadership crisis. Surprisingly, dictators are not the only characters competing to be at the center of

11 Rafael Leónidas Trujillo’s body was never found in the trunk of any car but left on the street, where he fell. In my view, in re-writing these events, Julia Álvarez makes Trujillo’s death into a “gangster-style” execution. This representation advances the idea of Trujillo as the member of a criminal organization that may or may not survive his demise.
dictatorial stories informed by totalitarian poetics. Many times, other historical figures who
antagonized the dictatorial regime become credible alternatives to the dictator. These characters
sometimes even become legendary, and their rise in the popular imagination resembles the path
taken by the dictator himself. In this sense, characters, regardless of their personal agenda or
political ideology, emulate the dynamics of Latin American “caudillismo” and reveal the
fickleness of Latin American populist discourses.

Against the presumptions of “leadership” being akin to “absolute power,” novels such as
In the Time of the Butterflies, Finding Miracles, In the Name of Salomé and Before We Were
Free propose that power is relative and exercised on a daily basis based on the reality of personal
choices that have little to do with trying to achieve a sense of cultural identity. In fact, Alvarez’s
dictatorial stories are always told by women and/or children, that is, those characters overlooked
in the Latin American dictator novel. In addition to this, she uses multiple narrators in her
stories, particularly stories grappling with historical moments or characters.

But if there are still doubts about Alvarez’s intention to challenge the authoritarian
dynamics of power prevalent in Caribbean discourse, one needs only to consider how she
approaches historical characters. One of her essays included in Something to Declare, for
example, attests to the research process Alvarez underwent to collect the material that she would
use to write, arguably, what would be her most popular story on the Trujillo regime in the
Dominican Republic. The essay, entitled “In the Time of the Butterflies: Chasing the
Butterflies,” becomes both a final reflection and a postscript to In the Time of the Butterflies,
while simultaneously demonstrating the fragmentation poetics discussed earlier in this chapter.
In her essay, Alvarez includes a page (a fragment) of a journal in which she took notes at the
time of her visit to the Mirabal house, now a museum. The author ponders on the meaning of
one of the Mirabal sister’s long braid, which was cut off from her owner after she was
assassinated by Trujillo’s thugs:

María Teresa’s long braid lies under a glass cover on her “vanity.” There are still
twigs and dirt and slivers of glass from her last moments tumbling down the
mountain in that rented Jeep. When Noris [daughter of Patria Mirabal] heads out
for the next room, I lift the case and touch the hair. It feels like regular real hair”
(200).

Alvarez ends her note commenting on how the hair didn’t feel sacred or supernatural but
ordinary, something real and accessible to the touch. This essay undermines the interpretations of
scholars such as Trenton Hickman, who identify Alvarez’s stories of dictatorship as “peculiar
textual artifacts” that combine “postmodern techniques of decentered narration, collage and
pastiche to age-old practices of hagiography that honor and ‘commemorate’ saints without
undermining its honorific mode through a postmodern use of irony”(Hickman 2006, 100). But
Alvarez does not write hagiography. Her relationship to the Mirabal sisters, both in reality and as
characters in fiction, is rather more complex:

The actual sisters I never knew, nor did I have access to enough information or the
talents and inclinations of a biographer to be able to adequately record them. As
for the sisters of legend, wrapped in superlatives and ascended into myth, they
were finally also inaccessible to me. I realized, too, that such deification was
dangerous, the same god-making impulse that had created our tyrant. And
ironically, by making them myth, we lost the Mirabals once more, dismissing the
challenge of their courage as impossible for us, ordinary men and women (Alvarez
1995, 325) [All italics are mine].

Julia Alvarez locates both her characters and the dictator archetype within the same dynamics of
power. Even so, each of the sisters is distinctly drawn. While Alvarez asserts her admiration for
the Mirabal sisters and underscores their importance for the Western World, in her story she
insists on the different personal motivations each one had to oppose the regime. This is achieved
both thematically and textually. The Mirabal sisters in the story possess very distinct
personalities that take them through different paths to develop their political awareness. In very
general terms, Minerva is the character that most strongly resembles the classic hero of the Latin American dictator novel. She is openly defiant, intellectually-inclined and the only one who directly confronts the dictator. Patria is deeply religious, simple and straightforward. It is through her religious faith and zeal that she starts questioning the world she lives in and what will lead her to join her sisters in their efforts to defy the regime. María Teresa is the younger sister in almost every respect. She is innocent, playful and coquettish. She is deeply interested in boys and has a strong connection with Minerva. She joins the underground movement out of curiosity and because she falls in love with one of the young revolutionaries: Leandro Guzmán, codenamed Palomino. Finally, Dede Mirabal, the sister who survives the events, is characterized by her pragmatic approach to what is happening around her. While she is inclined to join her sisters, her duties as a mother and a wife come first. She still bears the responsibilities for maintaining her sisters’ memories alive and in fact has published her memoirs recently, as I indicated earlier.

The sisters show us different aspects of the heroic character that antagonizes the dictator: the intellectual rebel, the compassionate martyr, the ardent romantic, and the pragmatic strategist. Nevertheless, what makes these characters stand out from those in other dictatorial narratives is how Alvarez gives her readers a glimpse of their dark and more human side. Minerva, the leader against patriarchal authoritarianism (she goes against the wishes of both her father and Trujillo, the self-proclaimed father of the nation), competes against Dedé for the attentions of Lío [Spanish for trouble] and withstands in her marriage her husband’s infidelities, just as her mother had put up with her father’s infidelities. Likewise, as a girl, Patria is torn between faith and desire, a conflict that resolves itself naturally when she marries Pedro. Later on, a miscarriage in her third pregnancy leads her to a crisis of faith that will make her question everything she has
known and cherished. It is this crisis that leads her to the intersection of religion and politics and that strengthens her own approach to faith itself, beyond any religious dogma. María Teresa, on the other hand, demonstrates throughout the novel the significance of controlling one’s own emotions in light of political events, for those who are highly emotional are easily controlled by others. When she is imprisoned along with Minerva, she develops a bond with other female prisoners regardless of their education and socio-economical status. She decides that there are other ways to effect social change, ways that are not necessarily contained within traditional politics. Because of her experience in prison, she decides to stop her underground involvement. Finally, Dedé reveals how a logical and pragmatic approach to politics does not necessarily result in political neutrality or disenfranchisement. Dedé is as involved and socially committed as her assassinated sisters, despite choosing a different path of action. Through her the reader realizes that the legacy of the Mirabal sisters do not end with her deaths, it only changes form.

The aesthetics of fragmentation extends as well to the physical aspects of Alvarez’s work. It presents the reader with torn pages, newspapers cuttings, isolated journal pages, party invitations, disconnected letters—all indications of what it means to live within a dictatorial regime strongly supported by logo-centric power dynamics. Alvarez’s use of fragmented materials and experiences also reminds the readers that with dictatorial regimes there is always a deep sense of loss that that no dictatorial story is ever complete or even completely finished.

This sense of loss is ever present in Trans-Caribbean narratives; however, Trans-Caribbean authors are careful not to let it dominate over other considerations. A key strategy in contemporary Caribbean narratives is to strive for a balance between what is lost, ignored or erased and what can still be achieved with the resources at hand. For too long, the idea of a fragmented Caribbean has been used to compare—unfavorably—this region with Europe, the
United States and even the rest of Latin America. Simon Gikandi, for example, contends that “only by subverting colonial modernism, could Caribbean writers become modernists” (Gikandi 1992, 256).

Absence and loss in literature has been analyzed mostly through trauma studies based on events like the Holocaust, the Atomic Bomb and Apartheid. Yet for contemporary Trans-Caribbean narratives, absence and loss are essential to creation. Ultimately any text begins in a blank space, thus the void within a story necessarily compels the author to fill it. Trans-Caribbean authors underscore their role as active learners by including many different sources, which may or may not have been considered altogether in the past. The juxtaposition of different sources encourages free association of ideas, effectively creating conceptual paradigms for transculturation and hybridity. The text presents itself as a hybrid construction told by those who are generally minor characters in other dictator novels.

Julia Alvarez effectively shows the reader how different characters and stories transcend their geographical, textual and socio-historical circumstances by incorporating “foreign” characters and by creating unexpected relationships from book to book. Chucha, Mr. Mancini and Oscar Mancini, Mr. Washburn and her son in *Before We Were Free* offer a different insight and perspective to what the De La Torre family is experiencing under dictatorial control. The De La Torre family connects us with other Alvarez’s narratives such as *Yo!* and *How the Garcia Girls lost their Accents* as the family that stayed longer under the regime. Likewise in the story *Finding Miracles*, characters such as Milly’s grandma Happy Kaufmann and Pablo (who is not given a last name in the story) aid the reader to make connections that transcend their ideological, narrative and circumstantial limits. If *Before We Were Free* becomes a counterpart to *How the Garcia Girls lost their Accents* and *Yo!*, *Finding Miracles* becomes complementary
to *Before We Were Free* as both are narratives for young readers of all ages that address the transnational legacies of dictatorial and authoritarian regimes.

**Family Sagas**

The common use of the term “family saga” to identify stories that narrate dictatorial regimes from a transnational point of view reveals how the family is a metaphor to destabilize the national imperatives of cultural identity in the Caribbean. This is true for all of Alvarez’s dictatorial narratives. In *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion*, for example, Silvio Arias explains Alvarez’s use of a genealogical tree in *In the Name of the Butterflies*:

As many writers of Hispanic origin do when telling a family saga, Alvarez employs a tree to help orient the reader. Structurally, the Dominican-American writer experiments with regards to the location of the family tree. Rather than appearing prior to the beginning of the narrative—as tradition dictates—the family tree appears at the conclusion of the Prologue. The unusual placement of the tree coincides with Camila giving her assistant, Nancy Palmer, a condensed version of the family history. Thus, by the beginning of the first chapter, the reader is already familiar with the framework of the entire story, and the reminder of the narratives serves to flesh it out (Arias 2001, 122).

A genealogical tree is a common way to assert identity in relation to others. Family is the most basic form of any social structure, defined as a patterned social arrangement that determines, in varying degrees, the behavior of the individuals within it. Arias mentions how Alvarez experiments with the location of the family tree within the story, a location that he characterizes as unusual in regards to a narrative tradition. Although Arias never addresses why Alvarez chooses to defy these conventions, I would like to propose this particular structure as a way to challenge the normative interpretations of Caribbean culture and history within a larger Latin American literary tradition. Ultimately, location is not as important to narrate the dictatorship as the interactions and dynamics that arise from it. To see how this idea branches out, one just needs to analyze more closely the family tree provided in the story. Of fifteen entries that
compose the tree (which even includes the family pets), eleven are marked by gaps of information, questions and even a phone number to continue the query. The tree is Camila’s student assistant’s attempt to “pin down better” (9) her professor’s personal story, yet the people depicted in the tree have already disappeared, died, gone into hiding, or had been made invisible by the political and national discursive apparatus. All of them grouped together do not amount to the whole story. The ambiguity of those included in the genealogical tree is akin to its lack of a specific socio-historical context, as the tree is framed amidst “tons of revolutions and wars, too numerous to list,” (9) which in turn resembles Alvarez’s reluctance to name Milly’s country in *Finding Miracles*.

As she did in *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Alvarez attempts in *In the Name of Salomé* to destabilize the national and cultural prerogatives that allow for the creation of “superlatives and myths” regarding national figures in the Dominican Republic. To achieve this, Alvarez chooses to write about the Henríquez-Ureña family from the perspective of two of its female members, Salomé Ureña de Henríquez, a revered Dominican lyric poet commonly known for her patriotic verses, and her daughter Camila Henríquez Ureña one of the first Latina Caribbean scholars in the US, who holds the rare if not unique honor of possessing the title of professor emeritus at both Vassar College and the Universidad de La Habana, and who, despite her many achievements, has passed into relative obscurity when compared with other members of her family. These characters help shed light on common practices of cultural disenfranchisement because their juxtaposition shows how some historical figures are preferred over others by means of the popular and collective interpretations that often silence the individuals in question or render them invisible. Likewise, due to their gender, these characters do not fit into or are easily misrepresented in traditional dictatorial narratives.
In the Name of Salomé is a pas de deux between a mother and her daughter, both having barely the time to know each other because of the early demise of the former. Alvarez chooses to represent both stories juxtaposed, to show us the similarities and differences between them. Either way, each story is unique to the characters. Each chapter is named after one of Salomé’s poems: the Spanish version of the titles correspond to Salomé’s life, while their translations refer to Camila’s story. The chapters corresponding to Salomé develop chronologically from her childhood to her demise due to tuberculosis. Meanwhile, although Camila’s story starts in medias res as she is giving up her pension and privileges at Vassar College to join the Cuban revolution, her life is revealed backwards, starting when she is sixty-six years old and ending when she is a child. The chapter before the epilogue shows a three-year-old Camila hiding in the steamboat that is going to take her to Cuba. She only comes out when her father calls her complete name:

“¡ SALOMÉ CAMILA!” It is her father’s voice shouting with such desperation she can feel his need drawing her up out of her hiding place. “¡SALOMÉ CAMILA!”

Salomé Camila, her mother’s name and her name, always together! Just as on the last day in the dark bedroom she remembers everybody crying and the pained coughing and her mother raising her head from her pillow to say their special name.

“Here we are,” she calls out.

In including Salomé and Camila’s childhood in the story, Julia Alvarez emphasizes the unnoticed parallels between groups commonly silenced and disenfranchised from historical (and cultural) discourses, in this case women and children. She then reminds us of how each character’s subjectivity ultimately help counteract traditional dynamics of power in the Americas, in her acknowledgments:

The Salomé and Camila you will find in these pages are fictional characters based on historical figures, but they are re-created in the light of questions that we can only answer, as they did, with our own lives: who are we as a people? What is a
patria? How do we serve? Is love stronger than anything in the world? Given the continuing struggles in Our America to understand and create ourselves as countries and as individuals, this book is an effort to understand the great silence from which these two women emerged and into which they have disappeared, leaving us to dream up their stories and take up the burden of their songs (357).

As Alvarez’s indicates in the aforementioned passage and throughout the story, silences, absences and voids are embedded in American cultural discourse. These silences are conducive to creation and storytelling and demonstrate how to actively contribute on creating new representations of the Caribbean. This is so because until now, Trans-Caribbean experiences are rarely represented in narrative discourse, thus, silence becomes the answer by default. For example, in her attempt to explain her story to others, Camila tells her mother Salome’s story to her longtime friend Marion, who (according to Camila) would be unable to understand otherwise “how just once before her life is over, she would like to give herself completely to something—yes like her mother”(7). The story that follows is characterized by “this habit of erasing herself, of turning herself into the third person, a minor character, the best friend (or daughter!) of the dying first-person hero or heroine”(8), thus she never truly gives herself away.

Likewise, in pursuing alternatives to popular discourses of identity, Salomé’s famous persona as a lyric and patriotic poet becomes a disguise of her true self:

It’s as if I had on a disguise, a famous face, behind which I watched people who just a few months ago would not have said good day to me on the street suddenly smile with deference and ask, “and what do you think of the weather we’re having, Señorita Poetisa?” (87)

Her poems, given out of romantic love, are interpreted as heroic gestures against Dictator Baez and slowly she is drawn to such a representation of herself. When someone else attempts to take credit for a poem about winter and white snowflakes using her pseudonym Herminia, Salomé, who is eighteen years old at the time, decides to write down the two hardest words of all: her name. In doing so, Salomé would come to be forever hidden and misinterpreted by everyone
else. People, from now on, will reject anything that she writes that doesn’t conform to the national and public discourses of “la patria.” As Camila’s public persona overtakes her private one, she is forever deprived of knowing her mother, a ghost who never seems to materialize for her except through form [her poems].

There is a correlation between how Trans-Caribbean individuals disappear from Latin American and Caribbean literary traditions and the idea that certain characters, like ghosts, still shape popular imagination and with it, normative (and thus invisible) dynamics of power in cultural discourse. In the Name of Salomé reveals the ideological cracks and crevices of such discourses in a story that up to this point seemed structurally sound. At the beginning of the story Camila ponders whether the only way to exorcise the (literary) ghosts of her family is to become one of them. Camila fades when other characters and/or their words take over. Camila’s longest relationship is of a platonic nature (with Marion) because “something has always been missing between them” (35). There are various alternatives as to what is missing. Camila believes at first that she was not committed enough to Marion, then suspects she was not committed enough to Marion’s country. Pedro, her brother, accuses her of “looking for a hero in a novel” (242) a comment that makes Camila retort “It is my mother I am looking for” (242).

Although Camila defines her relationship problems in terms of an absence, this is not completely accurate, as there is something always present between her and her prospective relationships: a prying brother, a concerned father, the oppressive ghost of Salomé, the prospect of another (more socially-acceptable) relationship, distance and even fiction. Camila experiments writing about her love to major Scott Andrews, even when what she writes doesn’t translate to reality: “He is a vague figure, even to her, like the mother she has made up and the brothers she talks to in her head since the real ones are never around” (194).
Her relationship with Domingo suffers a similar fate. Domingo, a Cuban sculptor, is commissioned by “some historical commission” to make a bust of Camila’s recently deceased father, Francisco Henríquez de Carvajal. Domingo asks Camila to pose for him, as he wants “to capture the living f-f-force inside the s-s-stone” (149); in other words her resemblance to her famous family. While the sculptor’s request strikes Camila as bizarre, given that there are more suitable models (such as her brothers and step-brothers) she agrees to Domingo’s request because of “a stammer—a pity with such a beautiful, throaty voice”, despite the fact that she knows her brother Max “has arranged some tribute without letting her know about it” (148) because of her reluctance to go along with “anything involving Trujillo’s dictatorship at home or Batista’s virtual dictatorship here” (148). In their first encounter, however, Domingo gives up and declares, upon looking at her intently: “your f-f-father will not appear” as to which she replies that “of course not, my father is dead.” Domingo responds, “No, he is not” (153-4).

This exchange can be interpreted several ways. It is possible that the sculptor, while first approaching Camila for what she represents, is finally able to see her for what she is. Although he had declared that Camila’s father would not appear, at the end of the chapter, when Camila and Domingo head up to the bedroom (a scene that is also hidden rather than described), she catches a glimpse of the almost-finished bust: “her own face stares back at her, fierce and almost finished” (166). The reader never knows if Domingo changed his mind at the last minute and modeled Camila’s bust or if he ended up finding Camila’s resemblance to her family. The moment when Camila declares that her father is dead and denies any possible resemblance between them, giving in for the first (and perhaps only) time in the story to her own desires is ironically the closest she is to becoming a Henríquez Ureña.
Domingo’s stuttering creates a gap in communication, both literally and figuratively. This speech disorder is commonly accentuated by situational fears, anxiety, tension, self-pity, stress, shame and a feeling of loss of control during speech. In this sense, Domingo, the only person with whom Camila has a physical relationship, communicates with her through involuntary gaps that become the physical manifestation of the context they both live in (Batista’s dictatorial regime). Later Camila feels at ease with him, as she understands that he is unable to reproduce, even if he wanted to, the stuttering sounds that she found so distasteful.

Likewise, Camila cannot decide whether to be a literary character or a real person, which becomes evident in their first sexual encounter:

He has always been able to read the state of her soul from the muscles on her face, a necessary skill for a sculptor he has told her. But she does not want him to see the cloud of doubt that is descending upon her. She buries her face in his shoulder and lets him stand her up, touching the whole length of her body. She is revolted by his big hands, his hardness pressing against her tights. The word become flesh is not always an appealing creature (166).

Camila’s ambivalence towards a concrete and defined relationship finds reciprocity in Domingo’s speech. In this sense both characters allow Alvarez to disrupt the idea of a flowing and formed discourse. The relationship between form and power is further advanced when Camila later declares to Marion that she is “trying to simplify, not complicate, what is left of the rest of my life” (74), despite noticing earlier how “the Dominican penchant for frilly rhetoric has increased astronomically since the advent of the dictatorship” (71).

In Alvarez’s narratives, even those characters that represent the narrative and intellectual cannon in Latin America and the Caribbean acknowledge the unequal dynamics of power embedded in cultural discourse, based mostly on location and context. Camila’s brother Pedro is such a character. He claims at one point: “I don’t like to compare countries, which one is better, which one is more right. I am interested in people, in individuals.” (248) Pedro intends to
abandon the United States, return to the Dominican Republic and take Camila with him. Earlier in the novel (but chronologically later in the story) however, he begs Camila not to join the Cuban revolution and accept instead a faculty position at Vassar College. Characters have a lot to do with Pedro’s advice:

“It’s all the same fight, Camila, don’t you see? Martí fought Cuba from New York, Máximo Gómez fought Liliś from Cuba, Hostos came to us from Puerto Rico. Right now the safest place for you is Vassar.”

“And you and Isabel are fighting from Argentina, and Max from within regime, I suppose? (125)

Both Pedro and Camila acknowledge how power dynamics remain the same despite being exercised in different socio-historical circumstances. Pedro reminds Camila that you don’t need to be present in order to effect change. Camila’s response further challenges normative representations of power because she asserts the individual roles and responses her family has in light of such dynamics. In her own family, the “reasons” that tie each person to the countries they live in are varied and do not always obey their political or social ideologies. Max collaborates with Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorial regime in Cuba and Pedro is at the time in Ramon A. Castillo’s Argentina, both regimes characterized by their corrupt and authoritarian rule. Form, however, remains an important part of discourse. Pedro declares that he defends poetry as the last outpost against “the bought pens, the dictators, the impersonators, the well-meaning but lacking in talent.” (125). In declaring this, Pedro, once again, turns towards a literary utopia that “encodes our purest soul, the blueprint for the new man, the new woman,” a statement that Camila concedes “can seal her doom” (125).

In In the Name of Salomé, the Dominican family becomes another example of the wandering Trans-Caribbean family. In the epilogue of the novel, Camila and Rodolfo get into a discussion regarding Cuba’s state of affairs after the revolution. Camila, who lives in Cuba,
believes that “Rodolfo, like most exiles, feels driven to soil the nest for those of us who stayed” (342) and insist on “trying to create a patria out of the land where we were born” (342). Rodolfo calls the Cuban revolution “the experiment that has failed” and retorts to her that Camila wasn’t born in Cuba and that her handicap (a know-it-all tendency in the face of ignorance) is showing. In their conversation, each sibling accuses the other of having a lesser claim to a Caribbean/Latin American identity, using arguments that still hold true for practices of cultural disenfranchisement such as being overtly intellectual, for not being born there, for giving up on hope, or for criticizing without being there. Yet there is one point on which both agree: “la pura verdad is that we have been a wondering family” (342). This affirmation asserts the transnational connections that emerge out of contradictory cultural interactions and narratives:

The seed of the Henríquezes are scattered across the Américas: Pedro’s two girls in Argentina; childless Fran wherever his wife’s family took their ashes when they fled the revolution; Max’s sons shuttling here and there in South America, so that the times I have called their homes, their wives sigh deeply and say: Let’s see. It’s Thursday…he is in Panamá.” Then there are Papancho’s French grandchildren, scattering his seed in France and Norway and New Jersey, so I hear. And every one of these children driven by the little motor of life and need in a world that increasingly resembles our neighbor to the north, a world without sufficient soul or spirit, as Martí put it, as if the great sacrifice and vision of the old people have washed over time” (342-343).

This Trans-Caribbean family saga becomes the sum of its many members, and its influence extends all over the world, despite the revolutions, wars, dictatorships and authoritarian tendencies that surround them. Likewise, Julia Alvarez’s emphasis on Trans-Caribbean individuals rather than in the circumstances that surround (and determine) their experiences, will continue in her “next book for young readers”: *Finding Miracles*. 
Incomplete Analogies: House is to Home what Country is to…

Perhaps the most interesting feature of *Finding Miracles* is Álvarez’s refusal to identify Milly Kaufman’s birth country, which has been ravaged by a dictatorial regime. By keeping the location of the story unspecified, Álvarez explores the signifying effects of dictatorial regimes for Latin American and Caribbean communities that otherwise remain largely misrepresented in Western literary tradition. The inherent tension in *Finding Miracles* emerges then from the author’s desire to “give light” (a metaphor that she uses abundantly) to the hidden and invisible stories excluded from “history” without making such stories the only possible thing to say about any of these countries.

Because of this, writing becomes an important means of self-discovery for the characters in Álvarez’s narratives, regardless of the circumstances and experiences of each one. Writing is personal and as such, characters will engage occasionally in writing journals, letters and poetry, even when the characters are professional writers or scholars, such as Camila or Salomé. While in the process of self-discovery, however, characters risk being misinterpreted when read by others. The implications worsen amidst oppressive circumstances such as those posed by a dictatorship. In these circumstances, it is understandable that Milly should be reluctant to write. Words might cost people their lives.

The story opens in Milly’s creative writing class, where she is having problems trying to complete a writing exercise. Her teacher, Ms. Morris, explains to her students that “stories are how we put the pieces of our lives together” and adds that “unless we put the pieces together we can get lost” (3–4). Ms. Norris asks her student to provide a written detail or two that can convey each one’s “real you,” (5) in order to exercise self-knowledge. Milly doesn’t know what to write until her hands become itchy:
Since nothing else was coming, I decided to jot that down. But what came out was, “I have this allergy where my hands get red and itchy when my real self’s trying to tell me something.” For my second detail, I found myself writing, “my parents have a box in their bedroom we’ve only opened once. I think of it as The Box” (5).

Stories come from experience; a statement that seems to hold true for Milly on both counts. She first writes about her “itchy hands,” then about a mysterious box that her parents keep in her bedroom; a box, that we will later learn, contains the clues to Milly’s past. While such details are grounded on Milly’s real life-experiences, she makes up “some lame, futuristic study about a girl alien” (6). Milly itches to know “the truth” about her origins. However, she is afraid that such “truth” will break up her family. Alvarez thus frames in her story a question that according to Silvio Torres-Saillant, binds Caribbean writers together: What literature and thought can come from a civilization that is aware of its catastrophic beginnings? (Torres-Saillant 2006, 7)

The story’s opening is the only instance in Finding Miracles in which Alvarez provides a concrete image of one of the characters writing and the reader soon learns that is a misleading one. Milly Kaufmann is perhaps the only character in Alvarez’s narratives that doesn’t need to write out her life. Her refusal to write about her life, which is akin to Alvarez’s refusal to identify Milly’s country of birth, and Ms. Norris disappointment towards Milly’s story because she didn’t write about her own life, reminds us of the many cultural expectations surrounding Caribbean, Latino or ethnic writers, who are asked to represent (and perform) their communities and cultures rather than exercise their own subjectivities. While Milly acknowledges that the story she wrote about aliens is lame, she is not ready to comply with these type of external pressures.

In Finding Miracles writing has lost its appeal. Milly’s refusal to write about herself is parallel to Alvarez’s argument that the author, like the dictator, needs to fade from view in order for the story to emerge. The fading of the author, ironically highlights the story as the
expectations to find a determined answer diminish. This argument agrees with the author’s manifest refusal to identify Milly’s country of birth. By hiding the dictatorial regime against an historical background “rife with dictatorships, police states, horrible states [and] horrible repressive regimes” (In Her Own Words: A Conversation with Julia Alvarez 2004, 5) Alvarez makes sure Milly’s story does not become part of a “charted landscape.”

Signifiers lose their grip in anchoring and guiding the story. Milly abandons her search for “The Truth” (with capital letters) of her birth parents when she realizes that her life is spread thin among three different versions (or retellings) of the dictatorship and that picking one story over others would never account for who she is or what she has experienced. In the first retelling, Milly would be the product of an affair between Rosa Luna, a beautiful peasant in Los Luceros, and a high ranking military officer of the dictatorship. Milly is at first, not thrilled with the possibility of being the daughter of a “might-have-been prostitute” and a “torturer who cheated on his wife” (209), yet Doña Gloria (the storyteller) is quick to note that if it was Rosa’s indiscretion and early departure from Los Luceros that warned townspeople of the upcoming military raids.

Another possibility refers to Milly being the illegitimate daughter of the only heiress of a big coffee plantation and a horse groomer. Alicia Moregón falls in love with Manuel Bravo despite the opposition of her father, Gustavo Moregón, to the incipient romance. The last possibility presented in the novel makes Milly the only daughter of the first female rebel of Los Luceros, Dolores Estrella and her cousin Javier Estrella, a revolutionary “comandante” (220). Despite trying to join the rebels several times, it is only when the “guardia” raids Dolores’ house (a drop-off house for the insurgents) that she earns their acknowledgement and “the guerrilla had to accept the first woman among them” (221). Milly is immediately drawn to Dolores as her

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12 Notice the similarities between this quote and the one included in the genealogical tree of In the Name of Salomé.
birth mother. However she realizes that her judgment is hasty when she considers “that the one mother I would have wanted hadn’t wanted me to even be born” (222), because that is the only character to consider abortion as a feasible option.

The three stories that explain Milly’s origins are akin to the three Mirabal sisters in *In the Time of the Butterflies* because they explore different aspects and assumptions regarding dictatorial regimes in the Caribbean. Each story has a normative element common to dictator novels, such as stereotypical characters (a prostitute, a torturer who cheats on his wife, a rebel) or roles (the valiant horse groomer and the fragile heiress) but also new elements that change the story and the dynamics of power among their characters. Dolores and Javier Estrella, fall in love despite being cousins. She is not immediately welcomed among the rebels. Likewise, the early and unexpected departure of the prostitute and the military officer alerts others that something is about to happen. By opening herself to all the possibilities of her birth rather than searching for only one answer, Milly challenges the narrow notions of identity that characterize the retellings of dictatorial narratives.

This is not to say that *Finding Miracles* is without its share of problems. Alvarez is prone to using occasional clichés that revert to the idea of the good revolutionary. Pablo’s last name is Bolivar, which of course infuses the story with the caudillo overtones that in other instances Alvarez criticizes. Almost all of Pablo’s siblings bear the name of a revolutionary: Riqui is short for Enriquillo, a Taino cacique who rebelled against the Spaniards for almost 15 years before being killed; Camilo reminds us of Camilo Cienfuegos, a key figure of the Cuban revolution. And then there are the romanticized names of the female characters of the story that end up inscribing the traditional national ideas of la patria, starting with Milly, short for Milagros (Miracles), Dulce (Sweet), Hope (Esperanza), Dolores (Sorrows) and Gloria (Glory, Honor,
Praise). Likewise, while Alvarez vows to “invent a geography and culture that could be any number of Latin American countries but none specifically” (*Finding Miracles*, 5) there are many instances in the text that reveal her dictatorship of choice: The Trujillo regime, details such as references to “El Jefe” (211, 213); a tropical island (235); and even an unexpected airplane “connection to Puerto Rico” (233). All this and more reminds us once again that stories sometimes transcend their author’s agenda.

From her characters to her personal geographies and cultures, Julia Alvarez refuses to be narrowed down to any charted landscapes, whether from the Caribbean or the United States. She prefers to dwell on the significance of the human experience, particularly of those who don’t make it into any canon and whom nevertheless have much to tell to those willing to listen.
“And so I write this to you now, Sophie, as I write to myself, praying that the singularity of your experience be allowed to exist, along with your own peculiarities, inconsistencies, your own voice.”

Edwidge Danticat

In the Latin American dictator novel, archetypal figures of power, representing collectivist or individualist positions define, organize and polarize the meaning of the story as well as the characters within it. This chapter considers the historical and spatial effects of thinking the Caribbean through the presence or absence of these fundamental archetypes. By removing allegorical figures of power from her dictatorial narratives, Edwidge Danticat questions the role these type of characters (and what they represent) play in relation to transnational contexts as well as what are their discursive effects for notions of cultural identity. The characters in Danticat’s dictatorial narratives interact in both their tangible and intangible capacities to defy notions of time, space and power and negotiate their identity beyond their socio-historical and geographical constraints.

**Embodying the Caribbean**

In this section of the chapter, I want to give a preliminary idea of Edwidge Danticat as an author, her literary career and some of the most common readings and interpretations of her work. Edwidge Danticat’s career as a writer, which has been praised by both scholars and the media, has been largely influenced by her life experiences, a fact that do not goes unnoticed by her critics. A brief overview of her life in relation to her stories sheds light, among other things, on how Caribbean authors and narratives are produced and consumed in our current global

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13 Parts of this chapter were published under the title “Contar la dictadura: La nueva poética caribeña en la narrativa corta de Edwidge Danticat” Cua.dri.vi.um 6.10 (Spring 2009).
economies and whether it is possible to locate and identify the Trans-Caribbean, especially amidst what some scholars argue is a post-dictatorial and postmodern era.

Edwidge Danticat was born in the rural Leogâne, Haiti, in 1969. When she was barely two years old, her father moved to the United States and her mother followed him two years later. Danticat and her brother stayed behind, under the care of her paternal uncle Joseph Danticat and his wife Denise. While in Haiti, she lived under the Duvalier dictatorship, but concedes that at that moment she didn’t fully understand what it meant or how it affected her life:

Growing up, I was always seeing people like that, and the things they did in the name of dictatorship. I didn’t really understand it then, so I wanted to revisit it […] I didn’t see it head-on [the dictatorship]. But it wasn’t unusual to see people being arrested without knowing what they had done, or to see people disappear and never know why. Writing this was a way for me to try to understand it better now (Rousmaniere 2004).

The immediacy of familiar separations was a more pressing concern than the Haitian political environment in Danticat stories; however, both ideas are very close to each other. Danticat summarizes what little she knew of dictatorial regimes through the unexplained disappearances of people around her: whether her parents or the political detainees of the Duvalier regime. The relation between the immediacy of familiar separations, and the unexplained political disappearances that took place during the dictatorship of the Duvaliers is fundamental to understand why Danticat addresses the violence of political oppression through the idea of the family and how she reconciles two seemingly distinct contexts.

Despite the harsh conditions of living under a dictatorial regime, Edwidge Danticat had a relatively normal childhood. Of this period of her life she remembers the stories told by her aunts and her grandmothers, the books her uncle brought home for her to read, her summers spent in
the countryside. Alternating between life in the rural country or “peyi andeyò” and her city life in Port-au-Prince would help her transition from Haiti to the United States in the future.

Everyone traces his or her family to some particular village. I was shipped to our family in the country every summer, and I got a peek at their life that way. Rural people are often looked down upon and depicted as ignorant by city folks. That’s not in particular Haitian but is part of a rural-urban dynamic in most countries. In my family, some of the older family members living in the city felt almost like they were in exile there. They would say, “I want to return to my country.” This mirrors the later kind of exile, the actual exile from Haiti that many Haitians have experienced (Lyons 2003).

Her life as she knew it came to an end in 1981, when she and her brother moved to Brooklyn to join their parents and two brothers that were born in the US. Although Danticat started to write her first stories in Haiti, she has explained that it was the initial isolation in the US she felt trying to adapt to her new surroundings that compelled her to write. While Danticat’s move to the United States was due to her parents’ improving economical circumstances, her arrival coincided with a second wave of Haitian migration that happened due to the dictatorial regime. If the previous migration was characterized by a big wave of Haitian intellectuals and professionals driven out of the country by the concerted efforts of a regime that needed to eliminate any resistance to the dictatorship, the second migration wave was composed of people with less financial resources. Danticat, as happens with most large migration movements, was quickly stigmatized as a Haitian in the US. AIDS was the stigma of choice, which was given an official character when in February 1990 the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) “issued a memo which advised blood banks to stop drawing blood from Haitian donors because they were potential HIV carriers” (Aubourg 1995). Danticat has said of that:

Then it seemed from the media that we were being told that all Haitians had AIDS. At the time, I had just come from Haiti. I was twelve years old, and the building I was living in had primarily Haitians. A lot of people got fired from their jobs. At school, sometimes in gym class, we’d be separated because teachers were worried about what would happen if we bled (Barsamian 2003).
In an article published in *The Progressive* later on, Edwidge Danticat’s recalls being taunted and beaten in school precisely for these reasons. Beyond the social problems common to the Haitian population of the United States in the 80’s, Danticat also had additional reasons to feel out of place. She could barely speak English yet she went to school two days after first arriving in the US, as her father thought it was important not to delay her schooling one minute longer. Perhaps more importantly, she barely knew her parents. In *Brother I’m Dying*, as well as the afterword of *Behind the Mountains* (2002), one of two narratives for young readers she has written so far, she mentions that when she “moved to the United States at age twelve, it was a big challenge for us to become a family again” (163) and further adds that one of her brothers born in the US refused to believe that Danticat and her newly arrived brother were his real siblings, thinking them adoptive ones.

Edwidge Danticat graduated from Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn, a high school geared toward teenagers who want to pursue a career in medicine. For her family, writing was Danticat’s hobby but she had to have a practical career. In an interview with Margaria Fichtner Danticat explains:

I think my parents had two fears about my writing. One is that there’s such repression in Haiti that it’s dangerous to be a writer. When my father left to come here, most of the writers he knew were in prison. And then, I’m from a poor family in Haiti. There are certain luxuries we weren’t used to people having, like painting all day or writing all day. But suddenly, there it was for me: the possibility of writing. “But would you be writing for 25 years and not earning money, and would you be doing something else?” ‘Would writing be a hobby?’ That’s always for my parents very important… They’re always saying “You have to have a career,”… and the safest and most esteemed one they knew about was medicine. So I was always encouraged to go into medicine” (Fichtner 1995).
Ultimately, it was her experiences working in a hospital that dissuaded her from continuing training as a nurse. The epilogue of her first collection of short stories seems to attest to that period in her life when family pressure almost got the best of her:

You remember her silence when you laid your first notebook in front of her. Her disappointment when you told her that words would be your life’s work, like the kitchen has always been hers. She was angry at you for not understanding. And with that do you repay me? With scribbles of paper that are not worth the scratch of a pig’s snout. The sacrifices had been too great (Krik? Krak! 221).

And also:

The family needs a nurse, not a prisoner. We need to forge ahead with our heads raised, not buried in scraps of throw away paper. We do not want to bend over a dusty grave, wearing black hats, grieving for you. [...] I would rather you had spit in my face (Krik? Krak! 222).

By this time, Danticat received a scholarship from Barnard College, from where she graduated from with a Bachelor of Arts in French Literature. Without a clear plan on what to do next, she thought of going back to nursing school but then she won a scholarship to Brown University and enrolled in their graduate creative writing program. Her thesis, entitled My Turn in the Fire: An Abridged Novel, served as the basis for her first novel, Breath, Eyes, Memory, published in 1994. The novel emerged from an autobiographical essay, which she expanded with fictional elements. In the novel, Danticat tells the story of Sophie Caco, a girl raised by her aunt Atie after her mother leaves Haiti to go to New York. When Sophie is twelve years old, she is obliged to abandon everything that is familiar and dearest to her, only to experience firsthand the sexual traumas of Martine, a mother she barely remembers. Four years later this novel gain widespread recognition when it became an Oprah’s Book Club Selection.

In 1996 Danticat published Krik? Krak! a collection of nine interrelated stories that explored the domestic life of people who have, directly or indirectly, experienced dictatorial regimes. Krik? Krak! refers to the Haitian tradition of oral storytelling composed of light jokes,
riddles and proverbs. Danticat, however, uses the phrase as the title of her written stories, which are anything but light, thus changing the formulaic use of the phrase. *Krik? Krak!* earned Danticat a nomination for the prestigious National Book Award in 1995.

Next, it was *The Farming of Bones* (1998), a story that explores the 1937 massacre of Haitians ordered by Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. In the story Amabelle Desir journeys back through her memories and to the place she lived when the massacre occurred, in order to find respite from not knowing the fate of her lover, Sebastien Onis, who disappears in the upheaval of these events. The book won Danticat more recognition when it was chosen to receive the American Book Award.

Four years later, in 2002, Danticat published *Behind the Mountains*, her first story for young adults. The book draws on Danticat’s own experiences as a teenager to create a portrait of her main character, Celian Esperance, a twelve year old girl who moves with her family from Haiti to New York. The family’s decision to move, however, is hastened when Celian and her mother are injured after a pipe bomb explodes in the bus that was supposed to carry them back to Haiti’s countryside. *Behind the Mountains* explored the political environment preceding the 2000 Haitian elections won by Jean Bertrand Aristide and more importantly, addressed and contextualized migration in the United States for a younger audience. Like Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz (in a much subtler way), Danticat acknowledges that children develop the same fears and worries of adults in a politically volatile environment, yet they remain invisible and disenfranchised in traditional narratives of dictatorship. To counteract this disenfranchisement she proposes to tell the truth and “talk to them in a way that does not speak down to them, but speaks to them in a way that shows respect for their interests and intelligence” (Capshaw-Smith 2005).
A second story for younger readers, *Anacaona: Golden Flower, Haiti, 1490* (2005), moves from the modern time to the colonial past and shows the European conquest and invasion of Haiti, through the eyes of the Taino queen of the same name. Like *Behind the Mountains*, *Anacaona* is written in an epistolary form, even though she acknowledges that Tainos did not read or write. The diary, according to Danticat’s interpretation, is “a series of images and symbols that could have been put away by a storyteller like Anacaona to be interpreted later.” (180) The relevance and use of visual imagery will be explored further in the last chapter of this dissertation, but suffice for now to say that this theme advances at length the idea of the emerging Trans-Caribbean poetics this dissertation argues for.

In 2002 Danticat published her first travel narrative and non-fictional work, *After the Dance: A Walk through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti*. The story takes us through the Jacmel Carnival, a tradition that Danticat herself experiences for the first time when writing the book since Joseph Danticat, her Baptist uncle which would later inspire her second non-fictional book, impeded her to join because:

> People always hurt themselves during carnival, he said, and it was their fault, for gyrating with so much abandon that they would dislocate their hips and shoulders and lose their voices while singing too loudly. People went deaf, he said, from the clamor of immense speakers blasting live music from the bloats to the viewing stands and the surrounding neighborhoods. Not only could one be punched, stabbed, pummeled, or shot during carnival, either by random hotheads or by willful villains who were taking advantage of their anonymity in a crowd of thousands to settle old scores, but young girls could be freely fondled, squeezed like sponges by dirty old, and not so old, men. (…) it was my uncle’s stories that kept me away from carnival celebrations in Haiti for years (13-14).

By confessing her ignorance and fears, Edwidge Danticat defies popular opinion towards the Jacmel Carnival and refuses to assume the coveted insider’s role expected of ethnic writers in the United States. Her story provides a fresh glance that draws you away from trite views of the Caribbean and becomes fertile in its possibilities “because when you come from a place that’s so
often politicized like Haiti, people tend to think about you in terms of generalities, and so I feel like I’m always trying to bring people closer to individual experiences” (Mirabal 2007, 33).

Danticat pursues this perspective further in *The Dew Breaker* (2004), a collection of interrelated short stories centered on an unlikely protagonist: a self-exiled “tonton macoute,” and the people that know him in Haiti and in the United States. It becomes evident in the story, that the dynamics of power behind dictatorial regimes do transcend socio-historical and geographical boundaries. The main character, who now lives in Brooklyn and owns a barbershop, is obliged to confront his past when his daughter, an artist, misrepresents him as a prisoner of the Duvalier regime. The story demonstrates the dangers of blindly believing in a cultural discourse that doesn’t always have the Caribbean subjects’ own interests or experiences at heart. Thus, it is not surprising that the book that follows, *Brother I’m Dying* (2007), is Danticat’s personal homage to the uncle who raised her in Haiti and testifies to the harsh, but often unacknowledged immigration policies Haitian citizens are subjected to in the United States. Joseph Danticat died in the custody of Homeland Security after fleeing Haiti and seeking asylum in the US. A throat cancer survivor and Baptist minister, Joseph Danticat was threatened by gangs and forced to flee to save his life only to find his death five days after having arrived in the United States, not even allowed to meet any of his family. This book won Danticat the 2008 National Book Critics Circle Award for a non-fiction narrative.

Danticat’s long writing career has been broadly recognized. She is the recipient of several important prizes such as: The Caribbean Writer Fiction Award (1994), The Pushcart Short Story Prize (1995), The American Book Award (1999), The International Flaiano Prize for Literature (1995), The National Book Critics Circle Award (2008), The Dayton Literary Peace Price (2008), and more recently a MacArthur Foundation Genius Award (2009). Beyond intellectual

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circles, her career has been praised by The Oprah Show, the New York Times Magazine, Jane’s, Harper’s Bazaar, Essence and Seventeen among many others.

Her wide acclaim as an author, however, has made her work vulnerable to narrow cultural interpretations which do not take into account her expressed refusal to be categorized as a “certain” type of writer. Danticat is one of many contemporary writers who claim and assert her Caribbean heritage from a transnational position. Her narratives do not depend on given geographical or cultural affinities. She makes a conscious effort to locate experiences and characters that are normally disavowed in dictatorial narratives because of their “otherness.” In narrating these individual experiences of dictatorship, Danticat’s stories challenge the normalization of political violence in cultural discourse, which in turn defies restrictive notions of identity in the United States and the Caribbean. Despite all this, many scholars are reluctant to acknowledge the multiple cultural influences that inform Danticat’s narratives, both in the Caribbean and in the United States.

For example, in his book Exile and Post-1946 Haitian Literature: Alexis, Depestre, Ollivier, Laferrière, Danticat, Martin Munro struggles to justify Edwidge Danticat’s popularity as a Haitian writer among her Haitian peers. In Munro’s analysis, Danticat’s “split identity” as an exile, her preference to write in English rather than in Creole or French along with “the clear willingness of the American literary establishment and reading public to claim Danticat as their own” (206), makes her an exception rather than the norm. Although Munro has a valid point in addressing the consuming practices that surround the reception of Caribbean literature and its authors in current global economies, he hints that Danticat’s success is due to some sort of anthropological or sociological interest she is able to raise among an audience that is not familiar with Haitian culture: “in short, it seems the more Haiti had slid into misery, the more successful
its authors have become” (208). When Munro starts identifying some conventional markers of identity that “inevitably slide and lose their ‘natural’ connection to Haitian identity” (208) such as language, gender, characters, trauma and dispossession, Danticat’s narratives are reduced to the normative dynamics of identity that seem to predate Caribbean studies, namely stories of exploitation and victimization.

Munro’s arguments exemplify how particular notions of identity unduly inform textual analysis. These interpretations are bound to have shortcomings. In addition, scholars are reluctant to acknowledge the influence of cross-cultural interactions that converge in Trans-Caribbean narratives, often times due to the fact that the Caribbean and the United States are built discursively against each other. Carine M. Mardorossian explores both topics. She identifies Julia Alvarez and Edwidge Danticat as part of a second generation of Caribbean writers whose literary sensibilities make them prone to be discussed as migrant writers rather than exiled writers. The weight of Mardorossian’s argument, however, lies in her discussion of how each one of these metaphors of identity (migrant writers and exiled writers) convey different theoretical and ideological expectations. The meaning of exile, she explains, has shifted from the forced expulsion of a nation and the impossibility of return (unless it is under threat of physical violence and even death) towards “what was left behind and the possibility of return” (17). Likewise, the term “migrant” which originally “suggested a voluntary departure with the possibility of return, now emphasizes the “dynamic relationship between the past, the present and the impossibility of return.” (17) Mardorossian, then, reveals how each category conveys

14 Amidst that second generation of Caribbean writers Mardorossian identifies Caryl Phillips, Fred D’Aguiar, Edwidge Danticat, Michelle Cliff, Jamaica Kinkaid and Julia Álvarez. Although she never identifies the first generation of Caribbean writers, she does refer to “some exiled postcolonial writers” such as Salman Rushdie and Bharati Mukhejee.
political and ideological meanings. While exile is tied to “revolutionary nationalisms and militant anticommunism” migration often refers to “an epoch of capitalist triumphalism” (18-19).

The reactions toward Danticat’s stories are often built from certain perspectives that imagine “the other” rather than “the self.” Hal Wylie’s review of *Krik? Krak!* (*World Literature Today* 1996, 224-25) for example, starts by dividing the stories. The first five described as “fictional, sensational and dramatic” are said to describe the “major aspects of Haiti’s social situation,” while the last four, which the author claims to prefer on the basis of Danticat’s “power of transforming small everyday realities into story,” are more “autobiographical.” Danticat’s stories, in this review, are favored because of their degree of “credibility” rather than their creativity. Creativity, which is defined as how well can Danticat represent her experiences, is measured against common places that define the Caribbean through its misery, violence and dispossession. Even when Danticat changes her geographical context in the stories, the Caribbean experience of dispossession is furthered through the negative appraisal of the ethnic-American minority victim of its social circumstances. As the reviewer characterizes certain stories such as *Caroline’s Wedding* as more “common” or “autobiographical,” the emphasis lies in the exploration of the “psychology of assimilation,” the domination of a “tyrannical mother,” and the story of the mother’s arrest in a sweatshop raid, all of them circumstances that exemplify the social realities of the immigrants rather than an individual (and fictional) story of the typical familial drama that surrounds a wedding. Wylie doesn’t seem interested in how the stories connect to each other beyond the typical representation of suffering, victimization and exploitation, nor does he show concern for the individual portrayal of the characters in the story: once again they are only important in their ability to convey a whole society.
In a second review (World Literature Review 2005, 83-84) Robert McCormick exemplifies how scholars favor certain approaches when reading and interpreting the Caribbean:

Unlike *The Farming of Bones*, which focused on Haiti and the Dominican Republic in the late 1930’s, this text is grounded in the 1960’s but also relates the last few minutes in Haiti of “Baby Doc” Duvalier in 1986 and the subsequent vigilantism directed against the henchmen he left behind. It also vaguely evokes Aristide, because Ka’s father, in his last official act, abducts from his church in Bel-Air and then kills a converted Baptist clergyman (Aristide is Catholic), the same clergyman who, in the Casernes Dessalines military barracks, will scar his interrogator’s face with the splintered wood of a broken chair in his last defiant act (84).

McCormick manages to summarize Haiti’s history within one story. When he suggests that the Baptist clergyman who is abducted and killed in the story “vaguely evokes” Aristide’s assassination attempt, he is not giving the text, or the characters in it, any chance to explain themselves within the story. Rather McCormick circumscribes the text to specific socio-historical circumstances that are not even related to the story and that reflect negatively on Haiti as a whole. Despite McCormick’s admission that “he is not able to piece the stories together “because some of the nine segments don’t seem to belong” (84) later on, he claims that the text is not well constructed and that he “senses” the scar represents “the badge Haitians wear as a visible sign of their collective suffering.” (McCormick 83) Haiti’s subaltern and victimized position becomes its most identifiable trait. This is done despite Danticat’s assertion that *The Dew Breaker* is a departure from her previous works because she writes about different time periods in a non-linear way” and that she “writes novels, not anthropology or social research” (Lyons 2003).

The emphasis some scholars place on writing as an act of resistance against a foreign other has serious implications, as it advances the idea of a victimized and traumatized Caribbean, recognizable only in its dispossession. Myriam J. Chancy for example, contends that the
recurrent use of “textual ellipsis to reveal the presence of a subsumed, secret, or silenced aspect of Haitian women’s history or culture” (17) originates in the absence of Haitian women from historical and literary documents. Informed by radical feminism and critical race theory, Chancy then proposes that “much of Haitian women’s literature should be read as a literature of revolution” (6) in which revolution is defined as “the search for an irrevocable alteration of the status quo, not only between men and women, but among women themselves, in a context of oppression is demanded” (6). Chancy even coins the term *culture lacune* to define Haitian women’s literature as a distinct literary tradition amidst an overpopulated geography of exclusion: Haitian women’s culture “defines itself *through its silencing*” (17).

Chancy’s definition of revolution in Haitian literature brings to mind Stephen Slemon’s argument in *Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World* (1990) that resistance is “never simply there in the text or the interpretive community, but is always necessarily complicit in the apparatus it seeks to transgress.” (108) According to Slemon, literary resistance remains “a strangely untheorized position” that fails to address three major areas of critical concern. The first one is that “centre/periphery notions of resistance can actually work to reinscribe centre periphery relations,” (107) and secure dominant narratives. The second is the underlying assumption that literary resistance is somehow there in the literary text as a structure of intentionality and as a communicative gesture of pure availability.” (108) Slemon finally reminds us of Foucault’s theory that “power itself inscribes its resistances and so in the process seeks to contain them” (108). Slemon warns us against the presumption that certain literary traditions are inevitably invested in resisting “revolutionary” practices, much less when these narratives, like Danticat, assert hyphenated identities.
(Dys)Functional Families

The paperback edition of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, includes a letter in which Danticat thanks Sophie Caco, the main character in the story, for the healing journey in which both women have been through together. She also includes an apology:

> I write this to you now, Sophie, because your secrets, like you, like me, have traveled far from this place. Your experiences in the night, your grandmother’s obsessions, your mother’s “tests” have taken a larger meaning, and your body is now being asked to represent a larger space than your flesh. You are being asked, I have been told, to represent every girl child, every woman from this land that you and I love so much” (235).

Danticat’s afterword is an answer to the harsh criticism that the story received, in particular by Haitian American women, who felt Danticat went too far in revealing Haitian women rural practices of “testing” the virginity of their daughters. It also attests to the complex cultural assumptions that surround Caribbean and ethnic writers whose works, are treated as ethnographical representations of the Caribbean enduring victimization. The social and historical background in these stories serves to confirm these assumptions. The “predictability” of the characters and the plot in traditional narratives of dictatorship has the ultimate effect of giving readers the impression that they had unrestricted access to complex cultures. Danticat’s letter to Sophie becomes within this context, a reminder for her readers not to make a fictional character the poster child for Haitian culture, regardless of how “familiar” the story may read. The word “familiar” in this context, is not one to take lightly. Danticat addresses the family, to address normative representations of the Caribbean and their subjects.

When asked about why the complex bond between mothers and daughters was a recurrent theme in her narrative work and whether she was implying a cultural domestic pattern with these “uneasy” relationships, Danticat replies:
“Not at all. It’s a complicated relationship even in ordinary relationships. Add to that separation, which, for me, is as strong a theme as the mother-daughter relationship. Sometimes it’s forced separation, other times separation due to the problems that have to do with dictatorship; sometimes, it’s abrupt separations like death, often violent death. For me the most fascinating thing is the absence and the recovery from that absence […] What interests me most is the separation and healing: recovering or not recovering: Becoming a woman and defining what that means in terms of a mother who may have been there in fragments, who was first a wonderful memory that represents absence” (Shea 1996, 382).

The Caribbean experience represents an important absence in mainstream literary discussions; an experience brought to life in pieces that are forced to configure a “wholesome” identity within certain parameters and circumstances. Instead, Edwidge Danticat proposes to read the Caribbean through its familiar absences and fragments to reveal the cultural and ideological patterns that perpetuate power dynamics akin to the dictatorship.

For starters, Edwidge Danticat is reluctant to imagine a commodified/homogeneous community or culture at either side of the hyphen that divides Haitian-American. However, she recognizes the pervasive nature of the imaginaries that inform the notions of a Caribbean identity and how they normalize hierarchical notions of power and cultural knowledge:

People always try to force a dichotomy between writers living in and out of Haiti that’s only based on geography. Of course that’s a factor, but we can’t neglect that there is this whole generation of us who left Haiti young and are now living outside. Are we supposed to be silent because somebody thinks we’re not authentic enough? (Candelario 76)

In Breath, Eyes, Memory, the dictatorial regime is relevant only as it provides the circumstantial background for the plot of the story. However, the political climate is used by the characters in the story to justify patriarchy, oppression, violence and abuse among the members of the Caco family. It is interesting to note, for example, that in using Caco, as the last name of her characters, Danticat hints at the “Caco Wars” that were used by the United States as justification for the occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934. Cacos was the name given to peasant
organizations that were hired by Haiti’s political elite to topple regimes. These organizations were behind a series of political assassinations and forced exiles that caused Haiti to go through six different presidents from the period between 1911 and 1915. The tie between the Cacos and the Caco family, therefore, lies in how political violence is used as a pretext, the cause for everything that goes wrong in the story. There is a reluctance to reveal parallels between domestic patterns of oppression and authoritarian notions of cultural identity, of which the dictatorship is only the most visible and public manifestation. Violence and oppression remain, thus, confined to the public space and blamed on a “foreign” other (the dictator) rather than acknowledged as each characters’ own faults.

Martine, Sophie’s newfound mother is an example of this. The victim of rape in Haiti, she is able to escape Haiti’s dictatorial circumstances, but she has not healed from her past of abuse, which also includes her mother Ife’s testing if Martine and her sister were still virgins. Sophie will learn from her mother’s past through her own grandmother, who will admit her role in Sophie’s own abuse at the hands of Martine:

“She is going to test to see if young Alice is still a virgin,” my grandmother said. “The mother, she will drag her inside the hut, take her last small finger and put it inside her to see if it goes in. You said the other night that our mother tested you. That is what is now happening to Ti Alice” (154).

Even though Martine hated Ife’s testing, she submits Sophie to it when she arrives late one night after being out with their older neighbor Joseph. This practice alienates both mother and daughter until finally Sophie decides to break her own hymen with a pestle to stop the testing. She leaves her mother’s house that night, marries Joseph and mothers Brigitte. Like her mother, however, Sophie is unable to come to terms with marriage and motherhood and decides to go back to Haiti, in search for answers to questions that nobody has dared to ask.
A common (and fair) interpretation of * Breath, Eyes, Memory*, emphasizes the sexual abuse suffered by Caribbean women who “are often subordinated to larger political narratives of the nation-state” (Francis 2004). These type of interpretations consider * Breath, Eyes, Memory*, as an attempt to voice the collective and subaltern history of Haitian women which often goes unacknowledged in mainstream literary criticism (Chancy, 1997), but ignore the fact that in the story, women are not only the main victims but the aggressors as well. Sexual violence and abuse are, to use Donette Francis terms, “traumatic heirlooms” that are transferred from the dictatorial state-authorized violence to the familial unit by means of socialization practices; in other words, the dictatorship is responsible for the aggravated familial relations in the Caco household.

Martine’s rape is normalized and justified within the violent environment created by the dictatorship, even though her rape by a Tonton Macoute is a possibility, never a certainty (in the story she doesn’t even see her rapist’s face, much less knows his identity as a Macoute) and the most immediate aggressor is her mother Ifé.

There is an additional reason why familial relations are such a pervasive topic in Caribbean dictatorial narratives. In the Caribbean, dictatorial regimes have historically adopted what in political sciences is known as “family dictatorships,” where the political power of the dictator is granted and transferred to members of his family upon his death. From Henri Christophe who named his son Jacques-Victor Henry as “Prince Royal of Haiti”; Francois (Papa-Doc) Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude Duvalier; Rafael Leónidas Trujillo and his son Radamés Trujillo, to Fidel Castro and his brother Raul Castro, Caribbean dictatorships are routinely a familial affair.

Given that particular context in which the private and the public realm are so intrinsically woven together, it remains strange that familial relations have not been more discussed in literary
appraisals of dictatorial regimes. Although the idea of the national family is a common rhetorical device in literature, this comparison is useful only in specific contexts. For example, in traditional dictator novels, families are functional only if their members convey the collective ideals of resistance addressed earlier in the chapter on Julia Alvarez. Likewise, if there is a family that mirrors in the private realm the dynamics of oppression that affect the public realm, they are represented as dysfunctional. Authors grappling with the problems of Caribbean dictatorial regimes emphasize what is public and hide what is private, somehow rearticulating in literature the popular saying: “la ropa sucia se limpia en casa/Dirty laundry is best done at home.”

As such, when Edwidge Danticat deconstructs what is perceived as the smallest and most private societal structure [the family] to show the individuals within it, she distinguishes between the subject and the social roles they are expected to fulfill (Danticat addresses the conflictive longings of a culturally inscribed ideal that does not mirror reality). In traditional dictatorial narratives, families are metaphors of cultural identity that ultimately explain the individual’s choice of actions. Danticat’s families, however, use the individual to raise more questions about collectivist dynamics of power while challenging the premise of a Caribbean community based on similarities of experience.

Danticat’s characters rely on fictional discourses that explain dictatorial violence and oppression in a more “culturally accepted” manner. In Breath, Eyes, Memory, Martine’s refusal to confront her rape in the cane field exemplifies this: “I know I should get help, but I am afraid. I am afraid it will become even more real if I see a psychiatrist and he starts telling me to face it. God help me, what if they want to hypnotize me and take me back to that day? I’ll kill myself” (190). Although Martine confessed Sophie that she is afraid to relive her rape in the cane field,
she is even more afraid to address the testing to which she was subjected as a child by Ifé. It is only when Sophie confronts her that she unwillingly admits there is more than one trauma in her life:

“When did you put me through those tests?” I blurted out. If I tell you today, you must never ask me again.” (…) “I did it,” she said, “because my mother had done it to me. I have no greater excuse. I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about my being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day” (170).

Martine’s refusal to acknowledge her past has the opposite effect she strives for, as she ends up associating her second pregnancy with the tragic events that lead to her first one. However Danticat suggests a more sinister possibility in Martine’s reluctance to identify her abusers, a possibility that reveals the familial (and private) unit as a cultural imaginary that perpetuates the oppression and violence manifested in the dictatorial regime. Martine’s fear to acknowledge her past lies in the fact that her personal ghosts always take after her family. When she tells Sophie the story of the cane field rape, (which revealingly is the only one she speaks of) she confesses that she never saw her attacker’s face, as he had it covered. The reason this is strange is that despite Martine’s confession, before she stabs herself with a knife, she claims she is seeing her rapist face everywhere. Even when the reader cannot be sure of whose face Martine is seeing, we know that either way, it is going to be a familiar face: the mom who “tested” her or Sophie, the child out of wedlock that looks like her father, the rapist.

Martine’s fear of confronting her violent past is related to Sophie’s anxiety of facing her cultural inheritance of violence. In Sophie’s eyes, Martine becomes the ghost that she fears the most:

Some nights I woke up in a cold sweat wondering if my mother’s anxiety was somehow hereditary or if it was something that I had “caught” from living with her. Her nightmares had somehow become my own, so much that I would wake
up some mornings wondering if we hadn’t both spent the night dreaming about the same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl.” (Danticat, *Breath* 193).

When Sophie asks herself if her anxieties are inherited or transmitted, she is asking if violence and oppression are inherent in Caribbean culture or if they can be blamed upon someone else. If testing suggests that the violence is inherited, passed from generation to generation, Martine’s rape seems to be arguing for the opposite, allowing her to hold someone else responsible of everything that goes wrong in her life. Still, she is reluctant to identify her attacker or confront her past. When Sophie ventures her own interpretation of the events the reader starts to understand Martine’s unwillingness to face her ghosts:

> Ordinary criminals walked naked in the night. They slicked their bodies with oil so they could slip through most fingers. But the *macoutes*, they did not hide. When they entered a house, they asked to be fed, demanded the woman of the house, and forced her into her own bedroom. Then all you heard was screams until it was her daughter’s turn. If a mother refused, they would make her sleep with her son and brother or even her own father. My father might have been a *Macoute* (Danticat, *Breath* 139).

By suspecting her father to be a macoute, Sophie is denying any possibility of cultural detachment from violence. Macoutes did not hide, thus they are “no ordinary criminals”. They impose a familial dynamic upon their victims: they ask to be fed, demand the woman of the house and force her in her own room. If they are denied what they request, they recur to other ways to disturb that reigning order by obligating the members of the family to have sex with each other. The idea of incest becomes very relevant to the story as it refers to the [sexual] relations between individuals who are closely related. In this sense, incest is another form of domestic violence. Not only macoutes force their victims to perpetrate incest but mothers test their daughters’ virginity. In an attempt to conceal these domestic affairs, Martine talks to Sophie about *marassas*: “two inseparable lovers” who are “the same person duplicated in two”
(Danticat, *Breath* 84). In recurring to the marassas, Martine implicitly acknowledges the existence of two parallel cultural narratives on violence and oppression: domestic and foreign. Her interpretation, nevertheless, falls short because all throughout the story, she maintains that these narratives do not relate to each other. Martine’s interpretation represents the culturally accepted explanations of violence and oppression, while Sophie portrays the Trans-Caribbean perspective towards the same problem. But more on this later.

The absence of the father in the Caco household, similar to the absence of the dictator in the story, helps reveal the cultural complicities and complexities of power dynamics in the Caribbean as local practices that are uneasy commodities to export to mainstream discussions of the Caribbean. Sexual violence and oppression are not restricted or can be explained through gender perspectives, as the dynamics of power are culturally embedded and enforced in the absence of a central figure of power. There are several examples of this in the narrative. Ifé’s husband whose death is established early on in the story, remains a ghost to his wife, who justifies her actions through his absence: “people, they think daughters will be raised trash with no man in the house,” (156); “It is hard for a woman to raise girls alone” (157) and thus ensures the dynamics of power to remain unchanged on behalf of the patriarchal order: “If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me.”(Danticat, *Breath* 156) Because individuals are superseded by their social roles, males are shaped in the cultural imaginary after the dictator: they are either oppressive figures or absent/dead, while women are nurturing and present.

Danticat reveals the dictator as an empty signifier for the cultural dynamics of violence and oppression blamed on the dictatorship. This absence becomes evident when Atie’s close friend, Louise, identifies a subject named Dessalines among the victims of the Tonton Macoutes:
“Li allé. It’s over,” Louise said, panting as though she had both asthma and the hiccups at the same time. “They killed Dessalines.” Who killed Dessalines?” asked my grandmother. “The Macoutes killed Dessalines” (138). Jean Jacques Dessalines, one of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution and the first ruler of an independent and consolidated Haiti under the 1801 constitution, was also its first dictator. By referring to Dessalines, which is a more controversial and ambivalent figure of the Haitian revolution, rather than to Toussaint L’Ouverture who is revered as the national hero of the Haitian revolution, Danticat addresses the problematic longings for authoritative discourses embedded in Haitian culture. The lonely hero/dictator figure is displaced by an oppressive multitude. This idea is further pursued when the text explains how the figure of the Tonton Macoute has developed with time. In its origins, the Tonton Macoute was a fairy tale fictional character. However this single fictional character soon evolves and becomes a multitude of real dimensions: “outside of the fairy tales, they roamed the streets in broad daylight, parading their Uzi machine guns” (138). The most sinister suggestion however, comes afterwards in the form of a rhetorical question: Who invented the Macoutes? The devil didn’t do it and God didn’t do it (Danticat, Krik? 138). Because the Tonton Macoutes are both a myth and a reality, nobody knows the true origins of their violence and oppression. The myth and reality of the Tonton Macoutes are inadequate because they are incomplete unless they start to be acknowledged as real people with human (rather than divine) origins.

The women in the story are taught to rationalize violence and oppression from a social perspective that equals gender roles with social dynamics and makes them blind to their private and individual circumstances. The socialization of gender roles in a dictatorial context is challenged through the interactions of the characters in the text. Marc and Joseph prove to be loyal to their partners despite both women’s fear of abandonment and personal ordeals. Atie
defies her social and cultural expectations when she chooses Louise as her companion rather than another man, to the scorn of her mother who cries trouble at the mere sight of both women. These relationships, which are at the margins of cultural discourse, allow their protagonists to confront their immediate realities as individuals. Martine, rather unwillingly has to confront her identity as a sexual subject with her pregnancy to Marc. Sophie starts to realize that she has been conditioned to remain a spectator of her own life and an accomplice of her own victimization:

“It suddenly occurred to me that I was surrounded by my own life, my own four walls, my own husband and child. Here I was, Sophie—maîtresse de la maison. Not a guest or visiting daughter, but the mother and sometimes, more painfully, the wife.” (Danticat, Breath 196).

Sophie has been taught to compartmentalize the many aspects of her identity, and thus she is unable to act on her own, dependent on cohesive and authoritative discourses which are complementary to the dictatorship but do not get to be discussed by anyone.

Public and private discussions regarding violence and oppression remain differentiated from each other even though they refer to the same dynamics. The idea of doubling along with the image of the marassas (or the twin gods in Voudou) and the use of pale andaki further the discussion on how discursive practices commonly thought to be infallible, limited and error proof, are in reality, ambivalent and open to discussion.

Martine’s refusal to see/acknowledge her rape is akin to Sophie’s act of doubling. Sophie experiences doubling when she is tested by Martine for the first time: “In my mind, I tried to relive all the pleasant memories I remembered from my life. My special moments with Tante Atie and with Joseph and even with my own mother” (84). By doubling, Sophie detaches herself

15 Rita de Grandis defines pale andaki (andaki dialect) as “a profane and everyday form of speaking—different from the “palé langaj,” the sacred dialect of the voodoo tradition. It uses proverbs, ambiguity, syllepsis as figures to code, or to overcode speech, to give it a double meaning: a first or obvious meaning easily understandable by Haitian speakers, and a second meaning decipherable only by a few.” (151)
from the abuse she is being subjected to by her mother and even imagines their special moments together. The act of doubling additionally reveals the complex relation between public and private narratives of power and oppression, and the difficulties that arise when both discursive practices are treated as distinct from each other rather than analyzed in relation to one another:

There were many cases in our history when our ancestors had \textit{doubled}. Following in the \textit{Voudou} tradition, most of our presidents where actually one body split in two; part flesh and part shadow. That was the only way they could murder and rape so many people and still go home and play with their children and make love to their wives. After my marriage, whenever Joseph and I were together, I \textit{doubled} (156).

In the aforementioned passage Sophie discusses the socio-historical and mythical reasons for doubling only to end up telling her own experience of it by referring to her marriage to Joseph. While the possibility of emotional detachment is perhaps the most pressing idea in this passage, another possibility comes up when Sophie frames her story within a historical background filled with murders and rapes, as it suggests that she is not merely a victim of violence but also its enforcer. Doubling allows for a parallel cultural discourse that erases the relationship between the private and the public. In her description of doubling, Sophie uses metaphors that demonstrate that nation and family are bodies “split in two”: the flesh part corresponds to what is spoken for while the shadows is everything that remains hidden and needs to be brought to light in order to heal. The most intimate aspects of people living within the effects of dictatorial regimes still remain in the shadows because they concern the Caribbean idea of a family and/or a community.

Edwidge Danticat addresses the parallelism between domestic and private spaces from many different perspectives, such as religion. By introducing the Vodun Lwa Marassa, Edwidge Danticat challenges one of the ideological pillars of Papa Doc Duvalier’s regime, known for dressing as \textit{Baron Samedi}, the death Lwa. Because in Haiti, Vodun was used to assert practices
of cultural disenfranchisement, the story proposes new meanings that transcend the old ones. In Voudou tradition, twins are revered as sacred and as such it does not come as a surprise that Martine tells Sophie about the Marassas, as her own attempt to distract her from testing:

As she tested me, to distract me, she told me, “The Marassas were two inseparable lovers. They were the same person, duplicated in two. They looked the same, talked the same, walked the same. When they laughed, they even laughed the same and when they cried, their tears were identical” (84).

Martine further explains that the Marassas admire one another for being so much alike, “for being copies” (85). Her narrow interpretation of the Marassa Jumeaux asserts the reproduction and perpetuation of sameness: “The more you are alike the easier it becomes” (85). Ironically, Martine’s interpretation prevents her from knowing and seeing Sophie for what she is.

Within the private realm of the family, dynamics of power are structured following social mores. In this sense the familial realm mirrors the same dynamics of the public order. While this refers to the same rhetorical approaches that have organized familial dynamics in dictatorial narratives in the past, Edwidge Danticat goes a step further by disclosing the personal, that which is taboo to speak of: the complicity of the “victims” in their own victimization. When sexual abuse moves from rape to incest, Danticat advances the idea of a cultural prohibition that needs to be addressed in order to transcend the symbolic structures of oppression embedded in the Caribbean narrative tradition.

The story of the Marassas and the act of doubling help the readers notice, how much of these parallel dichotomies organize cultural identity and the problems that these types of sorting bring forth. Sophie “doubles” in order to create emotional distance from a traumatic event while Martine attempts to achieve the same by telling her the story of the Marassas. Yet the dynamic of rape and sexual violence is not disrupted by any emotional, cultural, mythical or historical argument; on the contrary it is reinforced and normalized. Martine ends her story by locating
Sophie in the cultural discourse that encourages abuse and violence; Sophie is Martine’s marassa and her duties are clear:

\[
\text{The love between a mother and a daughter is deeper than the sea. You would leave me for an old man who you didn’t know the year before. You and I we could be like Marassas. You are giving up a lifetime with me. Do you understand?}
\]

“\text{There are secrets you cannot keep,}” my mother said after the test (Danticat, *Breath 85*).

Martine’s interpretation of the Marassa is an (hegemonic) attempt to control cultural signifiers (those of Voudou) and create an identity based on delimited boundaries and social roles, as a closer examination of the meaning of this Vodun Lwa reveals. The Marassa exemplifies the Vodun worldview capacity to articulate and retain two distinct and opposite concepts. The Marassa, or sacred twins are identified with children but they are more ancient than any other Lwa, and interestingly enough they number three, the idea being that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In her effort to fashion Sophie as her Marassa, Martine harms her and reduces her to the role of daughter rather than acknowledging her as an individual. Martine trades the whole for the parts as it is through the fragments (social roles) that she recognizes and acknowledges herself.

Sophie is able to confront inter-generationally the fears and silences she has been taught to forget and ignore. What distinguishes Sophie from the other women in the Caco family is that she wants to understand rather than escape her circumstances, even if they include new places and cultures. Sophie learns to appreciate the fragments as parts of a complex puzzle rather than as cultural signifiers, a theme that Danticat carries on in her collection of short stories, *Krik? Krak!* and *The Dew Breaker*. 
Locating the Caribbean (Subject)

Danticat, unlike her Caribbean predecessors, does not assume the idea of a harmonic and cohesive community where individualism should be condemned. Instead she validates the importance of the individual as an agent of social and cultural change. She reminds her readers that communities are formed by individuals who are different from each other and thus bound to have different experiences. Danticat reintroduces what Kamau Brathwaite identified as the problem of studying the fragments/whole,” (Caribbean Man 1) by underscoring the importance of the unnamed sign that connects and divides the two.

Edwidge Danticat addresses the idea of a transnational Caribbean from a formal and thematic standpoint. She favors a narrative structure intended “to be neither a novel nor a story collection, but something in between” (Create 62). Each story becomes an island that is secretly and invisibly linked to one another, but this time the connections and interactions are not limited to the Archipelago. As the connections between the “islands” or stories are not straightforward but concealed in the narrative for the reader to figure out, Danticat refuses to provide easy answers or to convey a final definite image of the Caribbean, despite the fact that, as a Caribbean author, she is expected to do so. This approach is particularly important when referring to dictatorial regimes, as it shows the author’s awareness on how compartmentalized Caribbean knowledge is and how this region’s literature can be misinterpreted to convey false or incomplete portraits of the region.

In this sense Danticat’s stories may be considered to support Paul Gilroy’s arguments on The Black Atlantic as a counterculture of modernity by demonstrating its accompanying aesthetics. Both Gilroy and Danticat direct our attention toward “the patterns of flow and itinerancy that characterize outer-national adventure and cross-cultural creativity” (The Black
Atlantic) and warn us against the dangers of “cultural insiderism”\(^{16}\) however, the former demonstrates these patterns by addressing modernism while the later illustrates what has happened from modernism onwards.

Edwidge Danticat stories strive to uncover the real human side of history. She argues that this side of history has been silenced by broader historical narratives that do not attend to the complexity of human relationships and therefore create a false illusion of knowledge and dispossession. It is important to note that Danticat defies the idea that Haiti is defined throughout those silenced histories as the exceptional place of trauma. In an interview she gives an example of these types of historical generalizations, albeit in a broader context:

> With Haiti, with Nigeria, with Sudan, people know some broad strokes and they feel like they know a lot of the story so what I try to do on some level is putting things that they may not know or they may have not heard, and sometimes they’re obvious things: “oh, people fall in love, they get married, they have children, they hate their fathers, they hate their mothers.” And I think, and sometimes for some reason that surprises people that this happens to people living in a dictatorship, or living in places where there is genocide (The New Yorker Festival 2010).

In retrieving the human side of history, Edwidge Danticat is also interested in writing a healing history; one that changes the signifiers, the historical narratives that are imposed on real people. Her own narratives attest to this as she has gradually becomes at ease with acknowledging her personal experiences in her stories. While in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* she felt the need to justify her writing in light of what others may assume about her or her culture, her last book *CREATE DANGEROUSLY*, is a far cry from her previous position. In the book she encourages immigrant artists and writers to interpret and possibly remake their own world by “borrowing freely from many cultural and geographic traditions” (133). Unlike her previous narratives, Danticat remain unapologetic.

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\(^{16}\) According to Paul Gilroy, *cultural insiderism* refers to the rhetorical strategies that inform a sense of ethnic difference, which in turn, “acquires an incontestable priority over all other dimensions of their social and historical experiences, cultures and identities” (*The Black Atlantic* 1993, 3)
A common trait in Edwidge Danticat’s stories is the absence of the father. This absence is closely related to the idea of dictatorial regimes as dictators model themselves as father figures who have to rule with a strict hand and take difficult decisions for the nation’s well being. The absent/dead father means losing the dictatorship’s main signifier and noticing dynamics and discursive practices that would otherwise be normalized and concealed in the text.

The absence of a patriarchal figure reconfigures familial relationships, even when the father is alive. In “Children of the Sea” a young couple is forced to part ways in the midst of dictatorial violence and political repression: the man flees Haiti before the government issues a warrant for his arrest and the woman is obliged to leave Port-Au-Prince with her family, as her security has been compromised, because of her relationship to him. As they write to each other aimlessly, we learn among other things, of the strained relationship between the young woman and her father, who has been emasculated as the patriarch of her own family by the regime. This is never more evident than when the woman’s family witnesses unwillingly the assassination of one of their neighbors; an old woman who had already lost her son at the hands of the Tонтon Macoutes:

manman tells papa, you cannot let them kill somebody just because you are afraid. Papa says, oh yes, you can let them kill somebody because you are afraid. They are the law. It is their right. We are just being good citizens, following the law of the land. It has happened before all over this country and tonight it will happen again a there is nothing we can do” (17).

The father trades his community mores and social values (helping the old woman) to survive the dictatorial regime. This contradicts the traditional discourses of power and cultural identity in the Caribbean, where, as I demonstrated in my first chapter, collectivism takes precedence over individualism. Rather than being a hero, “the father” acts cowardly in compliance with the abuse against his own community. His actions to survive the dictatorship are far from epic. However,
he doesn’t hesitate to give all of his earthly possessions in order to save his daughter from the threat of the Tonton Macoutes. Only by rejecting the cultural/national identity in favor of the individual (his daughter), the father is able to keep his family together and subvert the traditional dynamics of the dictatorial regime that asks otherwise. Likewise, the young man in the boat becomes the antithesis of the revolutionary hero, as he flees Haiti, remains unnamed (and irrelevant to historical discourse), and acknowledges the possibility of becoming a menace to everyone else if the circumstances require him to be so: “I am scared to think of what would happen if we had to choose among ourselves who would stay on the boat and who should die. Given the choice to make a decision like that, we would act like vultures, including me” (18). Nevertheless, when he dies, he becomes part of a Caribbean community composed of anonymous individuals transcending their geographical/national boundaries.

The idea of social resistance and revolution is reexamined from a more critical perspective in Danticat’s stories. “A Wall of Fire Raising,” for example, shows how “historical” and heroic narratives can be used “locally” and “globally” to maintain the status quo and the dynamics of power they “apparently” denounce. When Little Guy is chosen to form part of a school play, he is asked to learn and memorize the lines of the Haitian revolution. In the process, the story reveals the fictional qualities of local and historical narratives:

“It was obvious that this was a speech written by a European man, who gave to the slave revolutionary Boukman the kind of European phrasing that might have sent the real Boukman turning in his grave. However, the speech made Lili and Guy stand on the tips of their toes from great pride.

There are several important things to notice in this passage. On the one hand, Little Guy is learning the lines of one of the most important leaders of the Haitian Revolution: Boukman. The figure of the black leader of the past contrasts with the figure of the current black leaders “who are absent” from the narrative but can still be felt in the oppressive and poor circumstances that
surronded by the family. There is also the idea of historical/cultural discourse as a performance.

Little Guy is memorizing the lines passed down on him. As he learns to recite them, he is “fed” more lines and his role in the school play takes on relevance. But there is something more sinister suggested in the story, as Little Guy panics whenever he forgets his lines:

“A loud scream came from the corner where the boy was sleeping. Lili and Guy rushed to him and tried to wake him. The boy was trembling when he opened his eyes.
“What’s the matter?” Guy asked.
“I cannot remember my lines,” the boy said (68).

There is another instance when Little Guy forgets his lines. This time however, Guy has something to say about it:

“My new lines,” he said. “I have forgotten my new lines.”
“Is this how you will be the day of this play, son?” Guy asked. “When people give you big responsibilities, you have to try to live up to them” (74).

The story demonstrates how narratives of social resistance rely on form. An individual’s worth is based on their performance of cultural narratives that do not correspond to reality. Little Guy needs to follow and memorize not his own particular “script” but someone else’s. Ironically, the only time Little Guy’s scripted lines are appropriate, is when his father lies dead on the ground after falling from a balloon he attempted to climb in midair:

“A wall of fire is rising and in the ashes, I see the bones of my people. Not only those people whose dark hollow faces I see daily in the fields, but all those souls who have gone ahead to haunt my dreams. At night I relive once more the last caresses from the hand of a loving father, a valiant love, a beloved friend” (78-79).

The story shows that neither form nor context holds precedence when it comes to characterizing Caribbean experience, which emerges from the varying degrees of interaction among individuals. Little Guy ends with the lines “I call on everyone and anyone so that we shall all let out one piercing cry that we may either live freely or we should die.” In Guy’s case, he wanted to be free. His notion of freedom was not anchored on a collective ideal based on revolution and
resistance. He wanted to fly a balloon. Whether he is successful, or not, it’s left open to interpretation.

**Strategies of Resistance**

Trans-Caribbean narratives of dictatorship warn against the discursive effects of popular notions of resistance, which help assert normative dynamics of power. Some scholars, like Gerald Aching, propose the use of “real figurative and rhetorical masks” as a way to understand how Caribbean subjects mediate social relations and implicitly challenge authority. Aching understand these masks as a way to mediate between the different modes of visual perception applied to the Caribbean subject, namely, the superficial gaze or “mundane blindness” and the “type of recognition that is not forthcoming as onlookers fail or refuse to see” (2). Danticat, however, proposes to abolish the secrets behind those masks and the cultural shame associated with them. Although masks are useful as tools of resistance, they have lost their strategic value. Furthermore, Danticat contends that masks perpetuate and misrepresent ideas about the Caribbean subject. In the story “Caroline’s Wedding,” for example, we know that two sisters: Grazine and Caroline long for their deceased father and disobey their mother’s advice to use red panties in order to protect them from “Papa and all of the other dead men who might desire us,” (170) because “the sanguine color of blood was something that daunted and terrified the non-living” (170). The girls actions speak of a longing for an authoritarian figure that claims and defines them, a figure that remains masked and unreachable:

Suddenly, he dropped his mask on the ground, and like smoke on a windy day, he disappeared. My feet were now able to move. I walked over to where he had been standing and picked up the mask. The expression on the mask was like a frozen scream. I pressed the mask against my chest, feeling the *luxurious touch of velvet* against my cheek (Krik? Krak! 176).
Masking becomes a desirable practice, as the mask feels luxurious to the touch; however its tempting characteristics have more serious implications. In the passage above, “the expression of the mask was like a frozen scream” indicates the idea that the dynamics of power have been frozen and that we only recognize the Caribbean in its screams, whether those screams represents this region’s resistance or its suffering.

To round out my argument, I would like to comment on the chapter that gives its title to Danticat’s latest collection of short stories: *The Dew Breaker*. In the story a former *tonton macoute* who moved to the United States and who changed his old ways there, recaps his last days in Haiti and explains the reasons behind his migration. The story which is the last one in the book reveals the last familial secrets of the Dew Breaker’s family and with them the threads that held discourses of power in the Caribbean are exposed. At the start of the novel we learn that “the hunter” or Dew Breaker has kept hidden his true identity and role in the dictatorial regime of the Duvalier, even from his own daughter. When he is forced to explain himself to her, he says to her that he doesn’t deserve a whole statue. In the last story, the reader learns that the Dew Breaker’s wife was the sister of his last victim, a preacher speaking against the regime. The preacher, in a moment of sheer terror, reacts and stabs the macoute, who from that moment on carries the scar her daughter (and everyone else) misinterprets. In other words, the scar becomes the macoute’s most effective mask, as it camouflages him as the prey rather than the hunter. Killing the preacher confuses the macoute who, wounded and in a state of frenzy, crosses paths with his future wife, whom at that moment was looking for her brother. He urges her to follow him and to stop her search. In listening to him, the preacher’s sister transcends the frail

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17 In the first story, “The Book of the Dead” the Dew Breaker’s daughter Ka sculpts a statue inspired by whom she at the moment thinks of as another victim of the Duvalier regime. When she is on her way to sell the statue, her father disappears with it and later confesses he destroyed it because he “didn’t deserve a whole statue” as he was the oppressor and not the victim.
boundaries established between victim and victimizer, a frailness that the Tonton Macoute has only started to realize:

He was relieved when she asked a question first. And though she looked shell-shocked and insane, her voice didn’t sound it. It was as calm as a stream or one of those tranquil brooks his mother was repeatedly taking him to in his dreams. “What did they do to you?” she asked. This was the most forgiving question he’d ever been asked. It suddenly opened a door, produced a small path, which he could follow. “I’m free,” he said. “I finally escaped” (236-7).

The Dew Breaker effectively demonstrates how Caribbean subjects free themselves from the roles imposed by cultural and theoretical narratives. Characters are able to establish their own parameters of identity as the primary unit of reality and standard of value. In turn, both the Tonton Macoute and the preacher’s sister move to the United States, where they invent the life they want for themselves.

Edwidge Danticat reminds us that while representations, masks and secrets have their strategic function in Caribbean lore, we need to be aware of their limitations, as they can lead to undesirable results. Discourses of power in dictatorial regimes are not absolute or immediate but result from the interactions and mobilities of the people implicated in them. For Danticat, the time has come to remove the masks.
CHAPTER 4: JUNOT DIAZ

How do you articulate something for which there’s almost no metrics for? Where is, in our human experience where have we created a metric, that can sort of measure horrific violence. That can be measured in different power; that can measure the kind of totalitarian abuse that people suffer under dictatorships that can measure the loss of hope; that can measure the sort of broken spirits? In effect, for us to understand what the Trujillo regime and any other dictatorships did to a people to a culture, to generations we would have to summon the dead. We would have to summon all the people who died under this regime, whom had disappeared, who went mad, and only with the dead in conversation with the living could we begin to approximate what it means…

Junot Díaz “Interview with María Hinojosa”

The Fukú is U.S.: Challenging Caribbean Dictatorial Traditions

In his second work of fiction, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, Junot Díaz revisits the Trujillo dictatorship in a novel that has been praised in several important literary venues, among them: The New Yorker, Times Magazine, The London Review of Books and World Literature Today. The novel also won the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. The story revolves around the life of aspiring writer and overweight ghetto-nerd Oscar de León, and his family in relation to their cultural legacy of dictatorial violence and oppression.

Díaz has commented that his novel:

is a book about dictatorship and about the impact of people’s desire for authority, and how in some ways that weird desire for authoritative narratives, for narratives of purity, consolation and cohesion—and our desire for much about dictatorship—feeds authority. There’s a relationship there (Ch’ien 3).

Ironically, most critics and interviewers interested in Díaz perpetuate the longing for narratives of purity, consolation and cohesion the author condemns. The identity hyphen that Trans-Caribbean authors like Díaz wear proudly is narrowed down to one part of a complex equation that rarely accounts for the multiple interactions, perspectives and cultures in play within these

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18 Parts of this chapter appeared in a special edition of Antipodas: Journal of Hispanic Studies, entitled “Trujillo, Trauma, Testimony: Mario Vargas Llosa, Julia Alvarez, Edwidge Danticat and other Writers on Hispaniola” in fall 2009.
narratives. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is often described and analyzed as a “multigenerational family saga,” a term that, although not inappropriate (as Edwidge Danticat’s dictatorial narratives have shown us already), is used as a label; a common moniker that plays on the presumptions regarding ethnic writers in the US and that further alienates its audience into believing the book is about “the other” rather than about us. Another problem is that while at first glance these labels are useful to introduce and ease the reader unto unfamiliar topics, they do little to encourage readers to see beyond them; an idea that Díaz actively struggles with. All of these ideas may seem unrelated to the argument of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, but the author contends that there is a problematic relationship between narratives of dictatorship and the longing for pure, authoritative narratives. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* challenges commoditizing inscriptions of power, literary hierarchies and cultural identities by underscoring the invisible relationships among these categories. I believe that in doing this, Díaz asserts a Caribbean aesthetic of fragmentation.

Junot Díaz capitalizes on some of the most popular traits ascribed to Caribbean culture and provides creative venues to understand this region’s theoretical significance. In an interview with *El País*, for example he justifies the use of science fiction in the novel as the result of the cannibalistic nature of the Caribbean:

[Derek] Walcott es muy importante. Canibaliza la herencia colonial europea, quizás el rasgo más distintivo de la cultura caribeña. En el Caribe siempre hemos sabido reciclar los residuos arrojados por otras culturas al basurero de la historia. Uno de los narradores de mi libro aprovecha la ingente cantidad de material abandonado que son los subgéneros literarios, como las historias de horror y la ciencia-ficción, por dos razones, una para derribar los prejuicios que jerarquizan las distintas formas de literatura y otra, porque no hay ningún género que se manifieste mejor el horror a la otredad que la ciencia-ficción (Derek Walcott is very important. He cannibalizes colonial European heritage, perhaps the most distinct feature of Caribbean culture. In the Caribbean we have always known how to recycle other cultures’ historical remnants. One of the characters in my story seizes the opportunity to use the discarded materials of literary subgenres
such as science fiction and horror studies for two main reasons. One is to overturn the prejudices that assign ranks to literary genres. In addition, science fiction is the best genre to demonstrate the horror toward the other (Lago 2008).

Junot Díaz suggests a Trans-Caribbean sensibility that re-signifies scattered fragments or themes abandoned by logo-centric discourses. The Caribbean imaginary is historically informed by cosmography, cartography and travel narratives, whether influenced by Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus or Alejo Carpentier. Michael Palencia-Roth, for example, explains that Columbus’s obsession with what was not there, or which was only rumored to be there led to the enactment of “The Cannibal Law,”¹⁹ which among other things facilitated the colonizing enterprise of Spain. In other words, the labeling of the Caribbean subject always occurs despite the Caribbean subject.

Fast forward five hundred years and the rhetoric of absence and pessimism that defines the Caribbean is still alive. The Caribbean is fragmented; a fragmentation that connotes the negative term “broken” rather than the positive one “diverse.” What is worst: even scholars whose intention is to empower the Caribbean subject fall easily to these ideas. Alejo Carpentier’s prologue to El reino de este mundo is still used today to assert a Latin American (and Caribbean) intrinsic identity, but it does so by using the ruined landscapes of Sans Souci. Form precedes content. Junot Díaz on the other hand, reminds us of Silvio Torres-Saillant proposal for Antillean intellects: “to pursue the task of identifying and affirming autochthonous meaning by asserting the creolity of their knowing” even if that entails speaking “outside of the realm of the existing debates in the profession (Torres-Saillant 2006: 105).

¹⁹ The Cannibal Law allowed for cannibals who resisted the Spanish could be legally enslaved, transported and sold without any penalty whatsoever. However as Palencia-Roth points out the application of this law was not only subjective but deliberate: “A team of Spaniards –including a government official, representing the state, a priest, representing the Church; and a notary public, to certify the truth of what transpired—would land on a given island. A number of Indians would be rounded up for the occasion. The official would declare to the priest (or the priest to the official) that these Indians looked like cannibals. The other would agree that, yes, they were cannibals. And the notary public would certify the truth of these statements (…) The Indians from that particular island would henceforth be known as “cannibals,” whether or not that was in fact the case (Palencia 1997).
The fukú is akin to the idea of a dictatorial regime because both constrain the way in which the Caribbean is imagined and represented in writing. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reveals the struggle of Caribbean individuals who are trying to become their own authors, in defiance of insurmountable odds, whether those odds are characters, circumstances or locations.

Although Junot Díaz ascribes the fukú a particular Caribbean setting informed by the same historical and geographical imperatives that have shaped Caribbean imaginaries, he reveals in a recent interview that the “real issue in the book is not whether or not one can vanquish the fukú—but whether or not one can even see it. Acknowledge its existence at a collective level” (Danticat 2007: 7). The fukú becomes a metaphor for the historical and cultural bind in which Caribbean writers find themselves; a “myth” that speaks of the author’s longing for authoritative narratives. To acknowledge this invisible longing and address authorial power, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* becomes the sum of competing stories, voices and traditions, especially among three aspiring writers: Yunior, Abelard and Oscar. I say “aspiring” writers because each one of them confronts different set of problems, caused in part by their relation with fukú. Abelard, who decides to write about the mythical powers of Trujillo, thus becoming Trujillo’s author, has his whole literary work (even his medical publications) banned to the point that “not one single sample of his handwriting remains” (246). Oscar, the story’s main character, wants to write but his main role is to be “the character” of the story, and as such his writings are reduced to “science fiction comics” that no one can take seriously. He claims he has written a different type of book, resulting from his transnational experiences in the Dominican Republic but that book is forever lost. Oscar’s ambivalence toward believing if the fukú is real or not makes him unreliable as an author. Finally, Yunior is a reluctant writer who never claims to be an author. He writes instead, as a way to counteract the effects of fukú in his life, as he knows
what happens when you become the author of your own story. As such, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* becomes an exercise in how to acknowledge a literary and cultural tradition that dooms its protagonists to a specific fate, without falling victim to the same discourse. In an interview, Junot Díaz’s explained why he chose the fukú as one of its main themes:

> Well, the fukú has been one of those Dominican concepts that have fascinated me for years. Our Island (and a lot of countries around it) has a long tradition of believing in curses. The fukú was different in that it was the one curse that explicitly implicated the historical trauma of our creation, as an area, a people. I mean, how crazy is that? (Danticat 2007)

The idea is that the fukú addresses some of the expected effects of power in the Caribbean such as resistance, violence and oppression, yet it also suggests complicity with it: the fukú is part of the Caribbean traditional lore; it requires faith in it, which of course prevents it from being rationally discussed or analyzed. Its presumed effects are traumatic, yet they go unnoticed.

The “traumatic effects” of power in dictatorial regimes deserves a more detailed explanation as it helps us understand how these regimes relate to Caribbean cultural discourses of identity. Trauma has been studied in very diverse cultural and historical contexts. Whether it refers to the literature produced after the Holocaust, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima or Nagasaki, the Israeli-Palestinian War or more recently the 9/11 attacks; the representation of traumatic events in literature still makes for heated debates among scholars. Issues of representation, memory, history, the self and the collective arise as the threads between them become more evident and entangled. Literatures arising from traumatic circumstances do not happen in a historical vacuum. This is also the case with Caribbean literature. Thus it is interesting that in discussing the long term consequences of the atomic bomb in Japanese literature, John Whittier Treat\(^\text{20}\) brings to discussion three debates that can also be applied to

better understand the traumatic effects of the Caribbean colonial past in this region’s literary aesthetic, namely, debates on origins, representation and authority.

Treat’s first debate concerns whether a traumatic event (such as the atomic bomb in the case of Japan) is enough to create a unique literary genre of its own. In Latin America and the Caribbean, this question is embedded in several ways that are relevant to my research. For the purposes of a broader discussion throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, this question has been answered in the affirmative: the origins of our literature can be located within the boundaries of the colonial experience. Origins become important for cultural identity is inextricably tied to beginnings. By implication, novels of the dictator, a literary genre particular to Latin America and the Caribbean, share the same presumably traumatic origins as does the region itself.

Our literature defines us. Or does it? *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* moves us to reconsider the current boundaries and constraints of Caribbean literature: Is Caribbean literature bound to its historical circumstances or does it have the ability to go beyond them?

Treat’s second concern, representation, overlaps with the first one as it discusses the complex literary environment that follows a traumatic event such as the atomic bomb. In his research, Treat discusses the different reactions to the atomic bomb, which range from “normalizing” the experience in Japanese culture, either by sublimating the experience or by preventing any deep discussion of it. While in Nagasaki there was almost no discussion of what happened after the bomb, in Hiroshima some writers found it absurd and offensive that their literary reputation was going to largely depend on “the writings of bomb survivors” (104). A few even believed that atomic bomb literature was “a psychological complex which obstructed the development of literature” (104).
One may ask a similar question in relation to Caribbean literature. Is there a specific way to inscribe the Caribbean experience? Is writing enough? Is anyone able to recognize the Caribbean outside of its colonial frame? Junot Díaz proposes that instead of being concerned with the origins of trauma, we should pay attention to its effects, what remains unspoken or “normalized” in Caribbean culture. This is significant because colonialism has been acknowledged in the Caribbean for long while other instances of violence and oppression have not. In my view, colonial and post-colonial studies have become detrimental to an understanding of the Caribbean because violence and oppression are only discussed within this particular theoretic frame, thus discouraging deep discussion of these issues. The sublimation of violence and oppression is often referred to by scholars as part of the “colonial condition” which may give rise to a psychological complex that obstructs the development of literature.

Last but not least is the issue of authority. Who has the right to write and who doesn’t? Treat frames this question in terms of who could best narrate the experience of the survivors of the atomic bomb, the most notable case being the Hibakusha. Hibakusha is the Japanese term for the direct survivors of the bomb. They were severely discriminated against, as most people believed that the effects of radiation sickness were hereditary or contagious. When Hibakusha writers where finally reluctantly acknowledged (almost three decades after the bombing took place), the atomic bomb was already a much discussed topic in Western literature. Treat explains that “the unstable paradigm of writing achieves meaning by refuting it, by resisting collaboration with a language treacherously intent upon signifying only past meanings” (84). His words have a haunting echo in Caribbean literature. Authority ultimately determines who is allowed and who is forbidden “to speak the Caribbean” for that depends on who is a survivor and who is not.
All of these ideas relate to the role of history in relation to fictional or literary narratives, a recurrent topic in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, Junot Díaz is a harsh critic of historical presumptions that lead to “wholesome” conclusions and overt cultural generalizations, particularly as he constantly speaks of the Caribbean fragmented world. He does so by creating multiple cultural registers within a text and shifting the hierarchies among them. In an interview with *Slate*, Díaz expands on what he understands by history and how it shapes his own fictional narrative:

I'm a product of a fragmented world. Take a brief look at Dominican or Caribbean history and you'll see that the structure of the book is more in keeping with the reality of this history than with its most popular myth: that of unity and continuity. In my mind the book was supposed to take the shape of an archipelago; it was supposed to be a textual Caribbean. Shattered and yet somehow holding together, somehow incredibly vibrant and compelling (O’Rourke).

For Junot Díaz, his fictional text takes after a fragmented reality that is rarely addressed in narrative discourse (although it is constantly referred to ideologically). That is the reason why he touts the novel as a “people’s history of the Dominican Republic,” in reference to the history textbook written by American historian, political activist, and author, Howard Zinn: *A People’s History of the United States*. What stands out, however, is that Diaz is able to frame the importance of the commonly dismissed “fragmented history” of the Caribbean within a wider American context. Furthermore, writing has practical implications and is not an exercise on neutrality.

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* shows that writing as a mean to assert and attain cultural identity is at least problematic and sometimes even impossible. Oscar’s Grandfather Abelard, who is the first of the De León family to experience the fukú, has all its writing completely erased by the Trujillo regime. Similarly, Oscar’s memories, “everything I’ve written
on this journey” (333) are lost. Even Yunior acknowledges that his story is in itself full of silences, of “páginas en blanco” (149). While Yunior and Oscar want to be the authors of their own story and literally “dream” of this, they learn that no book or narrative could ever succeed in explaining all of their individual experiences. They find this idea to be simultaneously attractive and repulsive:

About five years after he died I started having another kind of dream. About him or someone who looks like him. We’re in some kind of ruined bailey that’s filled to the rim with old dusty books. He’s standing in one of the passages, all mysterious-like, wearing a wrathful mask that hides his face but behind the eyeholes I see a familiar pair of close-set eyes. Dude is holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look, and I recognize this scene from one of his crazy movies. I want to run from him, and for a long time that’s what I do. It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar’s hands are seamless and the book’s pages are blank. And that behind his mask, his eyes are smiling. Zafa. Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming (325).

Writing is both a blessing and a curse. Writing impedes others and ultimately us from acknowledging all of the fragments in our lives. Ultimately Oscar’s seamless hands serve as a reminder that no his (story) has been written: the Caribbean subject (Oscar) hides behind a rhetorical mask and his/her story remains a mystery.

**Powerful Characters**

Literary representations of power in the Caribbean have become a canonical discourse in which power is articulated as a political reenactment of the colonial past while other instances of oppression are largely ignored. Internal manifestations of power hierarchies such as the politics of race, class and gender are largely concealed or suppressed in an effort to present a united front against the more powerful “other” looming on the horizon. Those with power oppress those without it and resistance is thought of in terms of a moral and social endeavor rather than an
individual effort to reject systematic inequalities. Characters are identified as either good or evil. Those who resist become either martyrs to their cause or oppressor themselves. And yet the cycle of violence cannot be broken; nor can the roles of victims and victimizers be reversed.

This notion of resistance is strengthened by the ideological cartographies that distinguish between Caribbean and U.S. Latino authors’ social commitment. Louis Parkinson Zamora, for example, claims that “the literary energy of the New World [literary] project” prioritizes the “imperative of communal self definition” over “the urge for individual self expression” (198). Furthermore, Zamora mentions the U.S. experience over the last three decades as an example of a growing “collective awareness of ethnic, racial and gender differences” (198). She subtly emphasizes the differences between the U.S. and Marti’s Other America through notions of community and the self.

These ideas remain very close to those inherited from the narratives of social revolution and national independence from which the traditional dictator novel genre arises. While the dictator novel emphasizes the figure of an individual whose subjectivity overcomes that of everyone else, the discourses of resistance and revolution, by contrast, underscore the importance of that one leader who is able to lead his peers to freedom. These arguments presuppose the dictator to be a deeply egotistical figure, while the revolutionary hero is seen as selfless and altruistic. Enlarged to the political sphere, narcissism and selfishness become the main traits of foreign imperialism while altruism and social equality becomes the national ideal.

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* questions the scope of Caribbean’s traditional hegemonies by underscoring the allegorical role of a common signifier. The terms “dictators”, “heroes” and “authors” can be used in various ways because each one independently and uniquely holds a position of privilege that grants identity. Or do they? In the story each one of
these roles is deprived of its traditional meaning because, after them, no story is worth mentioning (as the story is already “common knowledge”). The story for example, deprives the dictator and his followers of their humanity and credibility. What remains is a cartoon-like caricature. The dictator is described as the “Failed Cattle Thief” (90), the “culocrat” (154), “Fuckface” (2), “The Dark Lord,” (225) “El Jefe,” (243) and “T-illo” (225). He is never described as an individual with personal motives. Similarly, his followers are denied a personal or intimate dimension and instead become “lambesacos” (222) and “SIMians” (237). Something similar happens to other oppressive figures of power, who become el gangster, el capitán, Gorilla Grod, Salomon Grundy, Elvis One and Elvis Two. Only one of these characters, Marcus Applegate Roman, is assigned an identity only to later become a minion. The reader learns that he had disguised himself as a human being in order to trick Abelard into misfortune (247).

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* asks whether a new dictator novel can be written; a novel that undermines traditional representations of the dictator as a strong caudillo who assigns specific roles to everyone else, including the author. In this sense Junot Díaz reconsiders “the myth of authority” that predates Caribbean literary production and proposes an alternative version to the official history:

> Nadie quiere un libro más sobre Trujillo. Sólo que a mí me parecía que después de tanto escribir sobre el tema, seguía fallando algo esencial. Es muy extraño. El problema es que el guión que proporciona la figura de Trujillo es tan fuerte que si escribes sobre él te conviertes sin darte cuenta en su secretario. Le pasó incluso a Vargas Llosa. Como novela, *La fiesta del chivo* es irreprochable y sin embargo, cuando la leí me dejó mal sabor de boca, porque me di cuenta de que a Trujillo le hubiera encantado, porque perpetúa el mito. Yo intento interrumpir el ritual celebratorio. El poder de Trujillo se perpetúa en las historias que se escriben sobre él. Mi libro trata de levantar una contrahistoria (Lago 2008).

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* defies a Caribbean discourse that ties identity to power or the lack of it. I already discussed how the dictator and his minions are dispossessed of their
humanity and become cartoon-like, but there are many other ways in which the story reverses the power clichés of the dictator novels. One of the most interesting ones refer to the use of footnotes, a resource often reserved to academic articles or essays and seldom used in fictional stories. Traditionally footnotes are used to provide a reference or comment concerning the main text without disrupting the main argument of the story. The footnotes in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are no different except that they are written in a colloquial (rather than academic) language and that they displace the traditional signifiers of power and oppression to the margins of the story. These signifiers of course include both authors and dictators, but are not limited by them.

One of the first things a careful reader will notice is that the characters discussed in the footnotes of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are described in what seems as a more detailed and accurate manner. Footnote 16 refers to Felix Wenceslao Bernardino, “one of Trujillo’s most sinister agents, his Witchking of Angmar.” The footnote then summarizes how Bernardino was always conveniently close to people who were all murdered in exile (Cuba, New York) because of their opposition to the Trujillo regime. While the description of these characters seem to contradict my earlier argument about how figures of power become cartoon-like caricatures, these footnotes keep on depriving these figures of their humanity. These footnotes underscore the fictitious and irrelevant nature of mythical figures in conveying a Caribbean culture. In another instance, the footnote challenges the reader to be aware of the cultural myths created by historical discourse: “Although not essential to our tale, per se, [Joaquín] Balaguer is essential to the Dominican one, so therefore we must mention him, even though I’d rather piss in his face” (footnote 9, 90). Junot Díaz undermines the sense of complacency that assigns all of the responsibility to the dictator, by highlighting the underlying
structures of power in a dictatorial regime. Balaguer is not essential to the tale, he is even portrayed “as a sympathetic character in Vargas Llosa’s *The Feast of the Goat*” (idem) yet he is one of many examples of how the abuse of power in dictatorial regimes blamed on one figure, may in fact have several ugly heads.

Junot Díaz takes his criticism of power figures to the next level, as he addresses the literary cultural traditions that reinforce inequality and oppression.

> You better believe that I was fucking with other books written about the Dominican Republic. I mean, have you read *The Feast of the Goat*? Pardon me while I hate, but people jumped on that novel like it was the greatest thing on earth! And you should have seen the Dominican elites fawning over Vargas Llosa. The Great Vargas Llosa has deigned to visit the Dominican Republic! Call me a nationalist slash hater, but Vargas Llosa’s take on the Trujillo Regime was identical to Crassweller’s and Crasweller wrote his biography 40 years ago! (Danticat, 9)

Junot Díaz broadens his criticism to include the problematic inheritance of dictatorial regimes and their representation by alluding to multiple context and discursive practices. His juxtaposition of Mario Vargas Llosa’s novel with Robert D. Crassweller’s biography of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, effectively marks each as a genre that does little to change or deepen the reader’s comprehension of dictatorships within and outside the Caribbean. Correspondingly, Yunior uses footnotes to criticize the self-ascribed importance that authors assign themselves:

> What is with Dictators and Writers, anyway? Since before the infamous Caesar-Ovid war they’ve had beef. Like the Fantastic Four and Galactus, like the X-Men and the Brotherhood of Evil Mutant, like the Teen Titans and DeathStroke, Foreman and Ali, Morrison and Crouch, Sammy and Sergio, they seemed destined to be eternally linked in the Halls of Battle. Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that’s too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators in my opinion just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like* (97).

In Yunior’s tirade against Salman Rushdie, the novel further develops Díaz criticism. Not only is he using a colloquial language that breaks with the invisible border that forever separates authors
and readers, but combines personal anecdotes, historical accounts, popular facts and fiction. By posing both dictators and *scribblers* (notice the demeaning term) as competitors based on the likeness of their objectives, the story reminds us how both want to shape the psyches of those around themselves.

Interviewed by Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz further explains the relationship between writers and dictators. Dictators shape themselves as mythic figures through their actions; writers create their own myth through their writings. Because the “Trujillo’s of the world” are invested in writing on the “flesh and psyche” of their victims, their writing “lasts far longer and resonates far deeper than many of his victims would care to admit” (BOMB 2007).

The main argument of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is to recognize the problems brought for by cultural representations, whether political or literary. Representations always fall short of reality. The characters in the story are credible because of their complexity, which makes them hard to understand or represent. Their inconsistencies make them real and personal while the dictator and his minions become empty metaphors. In the ultimate gesture of authority, the characters in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are let loose from the traditional roles they would play in the dictator novel.

Consequently, the fate of all characters depends on their actions rather than their contexts. Oscar tries hard to overcome his own fate to become culturally viable. He tries to exercise, asks for romantic and sexual advice, changes his looks many times and approaches the most beautiful girl out of cultural expectations. At the opposite end, Yunior strives to reconcile his image as a Dominican gigolo with a more emotional and intellectual side that he hides from his peers. Likewise, Belicia is both oppressor and victim. A black woman who was enslaved as a child by her own family and deceived by the men she loved, she identifies with the oppressor
rather than with the oppressed. Her kids fear her emotional and physical manipulation. She
dismisses black peddlers in Santo Domingo as “malditos haitianos” (273) using the same labels
others apply to her. Abelard is “un hombre muy serio, muy educado y muy bien plantado.”(211).
He challenges long standing ideas about the social and political engagements of Latin American
and Caribbean intellectuals. Ybon is an older puta who doesn’t use drugs. From all of these
characters, is Lola who better explains their common cultural heritage when she asserts: “Ten
million Trujillos is all we are” (324).

Let’s take for example the novel’s presentation of Oscar’s grandfather, Abelard. His is
not a story of particular importance, nor his fate different from many others: he becomes a victim
because he does not relinquish his daughter to the will of the dictator. But if the reader follows
this version of the story, he or she is guilty of blindly agreeing to the writer’s dictatorial will, as
Yunior explains later:

Let’s be honest, though. The rap about The Girl Trujillo Wanted is a pretty
common one on the Island. As common as krill. (Not that krill is too common on
the Island but you get the drift.) So common that Mario Vargas Llosa didn’t have
to do much except open his mouth to sift it out of the air. There’s one of these
bellaco tales in almost everybody’s hometown. It’s one of those easy stories
because in essence it explains it all. Trujillo took your houses, your properties, put
your pops and your moms in jail: Well, it was because he wanted to fuck the
beautiful daughter of the house! And your family wouldn’t let him! (244)
It is precisely because it explains it all that Yunior can’t be heavily invested in this version of
Abelard’s story, as it takes the risk of becoming too familiar. Yunior calls the reader’s attention
to the unlikely and strange ways by which the Caribbean is interpreted and characterized through
its cultural representations.

By repeating the commonplaces of Trujillo’s dictatorship through narrative, traditional
structures of power and oppression are reinforced rather than challenged, and the
reader/interpreter of the Caribbean becomes comfortable and lazy. As revealed by Junot Díaz
himself, he is interested in “programming my reader with a specific awareness not to Dominican history but to history. How it hems us in, how it shadows us as we walk, how much there is of it” (Failbetter 1). By addressing readers as passive consumers of the Caribbean, Junot Díaz goes further in his critique of the traditional dynamics of power in the dictatorial Caribbean and challenges his readers to take responsibility for their own practices of consumption.

The changes that the three main writers undergo through in the story help us understand the representations of violence, power and oppression in the Caribbean. All three authors acknowledge and embrace the blank book as their ultimate goal, their dream; as if to remind the reader that there is no written path to follow and that each one writes their own. At the end of his life Abelard choose to embrace his mythical and “hypertrophied voodoo side” with his supernatural accounts of the Trujillo Regime. Oscar acknowledges the possibility that the assigned roles of victims and oppressors are not as clear as he previously thought:

> Every day he watched the “cool” kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminino, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he saw himself. In the old days it had been the whitekids who had been the chief tormentors, but now it was the kids of color who performed the necessaries (264).

The story then, challenges the mindless repetitions of Trujillo’s dictatorial brutalities, as these strengthen traditional Caribbean imaginaries of dispossession justified by historical discourse. By addressing readers as passive consumers of the Caribbean, Junot Díaz goes further in his critique of the traditional dynamics of power in the dictatorial Caribbean and challenges his readers to take responsibility for their own practices of consumption. At one point, Yunior refuses to describe the beating and rape Belicia suffers in the wake of her romance with the husband of one of Trujillo’s sisters, “Let me pass over the actual violence and report instead on the damage inflicted,” (147) and instead emphasizes how there are not enough words that would
convey the horrors she experienced: “All that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope” (147). By rejecting the representation of gratuitous violence as a signifier, Junot Díaz warns us against the shock value of graphic violence, which is used to convey reality but does not consider the subject being spoken of. This passage also introduces one of the main concerns of all Trans-Caribbean authors, namely, the limits of language and alternative ways of representation, such as visual discourse, a topic that I’ll discuss further on. To think critically and individually about the issues of oppression, violence and power should be the first step in order to revoke the familiar dynamics of power and will help readers come to terms with the individual and subjective aspects of a cultural identity based on these hierarchies.

**Mainstreaming Fiction, Disrupting Form**

When the circumstances that surround the characters seem surreal and fantastic, the characters remain multi-dimensional and credible, rather than two-dimensional and cartoon-like. By borrowing the language of science fiction to describe characters and circumstances, Junot Díaz challenges the idea that simplification, exaggeration and unreliability are exclusive to any genre, or that scholars and scientists have the last word on the representation of violence and oppression.

Junot Díaz presents its readers with a very compelling play of concepts, when he introduces science fiction and graphic novels as an interpretive tool for Oscar’s story. The dictatorial regime becomes unusual and readers are obliged to re-examine their interpretive positions, as popular urban culture emerges within the story. The characters traditional dichotomies of “oppressors are bad” and “victims are good” translate to the two-dimensional visual narratives of graphic novels, comics and animation. Characters are inscribed as fictional because they do not convey the realities of a four-dimensional world.
Junot Diaz’s choice of science fiction is not something that should be taken lightly. Although a clear-cut definition of this genre does not come easily, one of its main traits proves to be very relevant to understand its relation with Caribbean literary representations of dictatorial regimes. Science fiction is very much concerned with the issue of credibility. Science fiction is defined as “fiction dealing principally with the impact of actual or imagined science on society of individuals or having a scientific factor as an essential orienting component” (Merriam-Webster 1045). If science is enough to lend credibility to a fictional story, then Dictator novels are no less different when they use historical cues (instead of science) to claim likewise. The main difference between both genres is that one does not go further than the book (science fiction) while the other (the Dictator novel) is treated as an accurate fictional representation anchored in cultural experiences. To the issue of how much of the book was based on his own life and experiences, Junot Díaz says:

That’s the kind of question which is weird, because in fiction I think that question is the least relevant, and yet it’s the one that’s most asked. […] as a fiction writer, that’s always a great question for a very different reason, because instead of guiding our reading as a reader, what it tends to guide is how willing we are to believe someone who basically makes their living off of lies? And so I always get a kick out of answering that question differently every time because there is just no answer that states the fact that I use the fictive (Zuarino, 3).

In his answer, Junot Díaz challenges normative interpretations of Caribbean narratives based on biographical, sociological or anthropological presumptions established a priori. These types of interpretations are authoritarian and authorial by nature, as they tie identity with narrative discourse. Instead, Junot Díaz refuses any claim to a particular or unique understanding of the Dominican Republic (and the Caribbean) and reaffirms that he is writing fiction. Whether the story is credible or not comes second to the fact that he wants his readers to approach the text as fiction.
Oscar grows into science fiction through a mixed exposure to American and Japanese cartoons, graphic novels, television series, books, movies and video games. This eclectic blend, which reflects the multi-cultural interactions and practices of consumption that Junot Díaz contends are common in Caribbean lore, feeds Oscar’s imagination and provides him with an alternate world in which he can reinvent himself anew.

Oscar’s main goal in life is to be in a functional and egalitarian relationship with a girl, in other words, to fall in love and be reciprocated. But Oscar lacks a model to follow. Every relationship he witnesses is marred with ideas of power, violence and oppression, starting with his own family. Belicia’s early advice to Oscar is not to cry for girls and instead “dale un galletazo” and “then see if the little puta respects you” (14). Even Lola talks about her mother in terms of being a slave owner on several occasions: “She was my Old World Dominican mother and I was her only daughter, the one she had raised up herself with the help of nobody, which meant it was her duty to keep me crushed under her heel” (55). She adds: “You don’t know the hold our mothers have on us, even the ones that are never around—especially the ones that are never around. What it’s like to be the perfect Dominican daughter, which is just a nice way of saying a perfect Dominican slave (56).

In an unexpected twist the story tells us that oppression does not depend on gender roles either. If dictatorship is characterized as a patriarchal order that embodies the “macho” complex, Junot Díaz begs to differ and offers several examples throughout the story, with the inclusion of strong female characters who abuse their power. In fact, Oscar is commonly attracted by such figures: Jenni is described as both a diabla and a dominatrix who ends up breaking Oscar’s heart. Lola’s female friends enjoy torturing Oscar by speaking “about the particulars of their sex lives with no regard for him,” (26-27) and at the beginning of the novel is Maritza Chacón’s rejection
what drives Oscar’s life “down the tubes” (16). By pairing sex and oppression, the author calls our attention to the different ways in which the power dynamics of dictatorial regimes are articulated in private or public narratives. Even though they may seem to belong to two distinct domains, they articulate the same hierarchies: someone always “comes/cums” victoriously and the others get “screwed.”

Oscar yearns for a relationship and believes that the way to get one is by becoming a hero. This is perfectly understandable if we take into account that in the Dictator novel only those who oppose the dictator are granted meaningful relationships with others. Yet Oscar runs the risk of becoming the oppressor when he tries to assert his cultural heritage. Oscar imagines the hero to be the hyper-sexualized Caribbean macho incapable of a long lasting commitment to someone else. By all he knows, the only way for him to declare his cultural identity as a Dominican is through sex. Sex always seems to convey a struggle for power. The people around him only seem to corroborate this. Tio Rudolfo advises him to get laid without getting emotionally involved: “Listen, Palomo, you have to grab a muchacha y metéselo. “That will take care of everything.” (24). Al and Migs, his childhood friends, only speak about their girlfriends in terms of how they relate sexually to each other; there is no mention about how they interrelate personally. Yunior’s practice is to seduce several girls at once, to the detriment of his own feelings toward Lola or the other girls he dates. Santo Domingo becomes “one big party for everybody but the poor, the dark, the jobless, the sick, the Haitian, their children, the bateys, the kids that certain Canadian, American, German and Italian tourists love to rape” (272). Yunior confirms to Oscar that “it’s against the laws of nature for a Dominicano to die without fucking at least once” (174).
Even when Oscar rolls the world fukú experimentally in his mouth, it comes out as *fuck you*. Yet again the most important quote about the relation between sex, power and oppression is revealed when the Trujillo regime is described as the “world’s first culocracy”; and Trujillo as a “Dominican Dictator, which is another way of saying he was the Number-One Bellaco in the Country” (217). Historical representation confirms Oscar’s greatest fear that in pursuing his cultural identity he is ill-fated to become the oppressor.

Abelard story is another great example of how Caribbean culture “normalizes” dictatorial violence and oppression under the parameters established by the dictator novel genre. Oscar’s grandfather is in the story, the one person that starts the fukú for the De León family. Our main narrator, Yunior, reject the historical commonplaces of Trujillo’s dictatorial rule to explain Abelard’s fate. The fukú is not related to Trujillo’s desire for Abelard’s daughter, nor has it to do with Abelard publicly mocking Trujillo. Instead he offers a less known but rumoured story in which Abelard started writing “an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime” (245). In it Abelard declared that Trujillo was not “human” but a “supernatural” being and that common folk were saying the truth. If Abelard was claiming “that Trujillo was, if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world!” (245) he effectively precedes his grandson Oscar as a sci-fi writer. The lost book of Abelard Cabral becomes Oscar’s inheritance, something that he needs to complete in order to remove his family’s curse, and in that sense, it is not strange that Oscar chooses science fiction as his preferred genre.

In the dictator novel, the dictator becomes a mythic figure anchored in reality by means of historical cues juxtaposed in the narrative. History gives a foundation to what otherwise would be too “inhumane” or “surreal” to believe. But in this version of the story, Trujillo’s regime’s inhumanity is argued for without the historical evidence. If history has been traditionally
inscribed by those in power, then the “credible” versions that readers are left with are obviously compromised. Abelard’s book relied instead on the orally (rumoured) transmitted tales that “common people told about the president” (245). In interpreting the Caribbean exclusively through its historiography, scholars often risk dismissing the experiences of the common folk as not worthy, effectively perpetuating elitism. The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao reminds us of the importance of what is irrevocably lost, hidden or silenced in representations of dictatorial violence and oppression. Experiences of oppression are not meant to be justified or given an ontological meaning, (as certain dictator novels often attempt) but should be addressed and acknowledged to revoke their hold of Caribbean cultural discourse. Reality will always be more complex than fiction.

**Credible Fictions: Towards a New Understanding of the Caribbean**

The story gradually moves towards an emerging Caribbean aesthetic based on the recovery of its dispersed fragments and their interconnectedness. Even though this aesthetic has been potentially explored by scholars such as Derek Walcott, Edouard Glissant, Silvio Torres-Saillant and Antonio Benitez-Rojo (among others), it is not until recently that this discourse has moved from theory to practice, if we consider Caribbean writers who actively situate themselves in multiple situational, cultural or geographical contexts.

One such example concerns the idea of the apocalyptic in the Caribbean. Antonio Benitez-Rojo claims that this concept is foreign to Caribbean culture as:

(…) choices of all or nothing, for or against honor or blood have little to do with the culture of the Caribbean. These are ideological propositions articulated in Europe which the Caribbean shares only in declamatory terms, or better, in terms of a first reading. In Chicago a beaten soul says: “I can’t take it anymore,” and gives himself up to drugs or to the most desperate violence. In Havana, he would say: “The thing to do is not die,” or perhaps: “Here I am, fucked but happy” (10).
Antonio Benítez-Rojo position strongly contrasts with Junot Diaz’s obsession with the apocalyptic. While Junot Díaz’s *zafa* prevents the apocalyptic fukú from becoming total and definitive, which seems to be in agreement with Benítez-Rojo’s own ideas about all or nothing in the Caribbean, he rejects the idea that there is no space for the apocalyptic in Caribbean culture. The main difference between the two authors ideological propositions lie in how Antonio Benítez-Rojo conceives the apocalyptic as a concept that is dependent on geographical, cultural or situational identification and Junot Díaz refuses to acknowledge these boundaries for literary and cultural purposes.

If something is evident in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* that something is precisely how its main characters Oscar, Yunior, Belicia and Lola locate themselves within a Caribbean aesthetic precisely because they are outside the geographical or situational Caribbean. The fact that these characters acknowledge both a Caribbean and an American cultural identity allow them to escape the fixed notions of a Caribbean imaginary based on ideological restrictions. Since the characters are no longer in the Dominican Republic they are obliged to come to terms with how they develop their own notions of cultural identities as there are no set rules to follow.

Fragments are important in subverting the hierarchies of power that authors instill with narratives of dictatorial regimes, a position certainly different from what Roberto González Echevarría’s essay “The Dictatorship of Rhetoric” theorizes:

“The postmodern novel, even going as far back s Flaubert, holds a mirror, so to speak, up to that image of the author-dictator, or the author-rhetor, and reveals instead a *weak and fragmented scriptor*, who is the secretary of a voice no longer enthroned, no longer his or hers. The Latin American dictator-novel undergoes and reflects a similar process (*The Voice* 1985, 70).
Junot Díaz tells us that which remains hidden and silenced in the traditional narratives of dictatorship, such as the common thread between oppressors and oppressed, or those whom lived under Trujillo’s dictatorial regime and those whom didn’t experience it directly but still suffer its consequences. This way Díaz sensitizes readers to circumstances which are not often linked together historically except by a few specialized scholars. By layering and connecting different experiences of oppression and violence Junot Díaz educates the reader beyond the reach of historical discourse and makes evident that not only historical discourse has its limitations but that it should not be considered decisive when making cultural claims of any kind. Junot Díaz reminds us of Derek Walcott, who while recognizes history as a burden weighing on the Caribbean, refuses to be determined by it. If Walcott proposes that Caribbean culture goes beyond the dichotomy of mimicking a foreign culture or defining itself in opposition to it, Junot Díaz advances that thought by revealing how the Caribbean is foreign and how the foreign is in the Caribbean, thus effectively expanding these region ideological, cultural and geographical margins.

In narrative representations of power and violence in the Caribbean, silences and blank spaces create a chain of events that have repercussions on the writer. Silences, omissions and blank spaces arise (in both reader and author) the anxiety of representation, of not being knowledgeable enough, thus undermining the authority of the omniscient narrator of the story, which will reflect on the author’s role. Junot Díaz argues against this by rearticulating those silences as places from which the Caribbean authors regain their creative potential. Like Beli in her childhood days, the Caribbean region needs to reinvent itself anew: “In fact, I believe that, barring a couple of key moments, Beli never thought about that life again. Embraced the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands, five parts denial, five parts negative hallucination.
Embraced the power of the Untilles. And from it forged herself anew” (258-259). Absences and fragments that are not accounted for provide the creative space from which the Caribbean can “untie” itself from its dependence to [trite] historical events.

Historical or logical documentation become useless as they invariably lead us to dead ends. Junot Díaz makes the most of the story with the absences, what is lost or that which seems too fantastic to be truth. The promise lies in the premise. After Oscar’s assassination, Yunior receives a letter and a package. While the package contained two science fiction manuscripts that Oscar managed to write on his last trip to Santo Domingo, what is more consequential to the story is the promise enclosed in the letter addressed to Lola:

In that letter he talked about his investigations and the new book he was writing, a book that he was sending under another cover. Told her to watch out for a second package. This contains everything I’ve written on this journey. Everything I think you will need. You’ll understand when you read my conclusions. (It’s the cure to what ails us, he scribbled in the margins. The Cosmo DNA (333-334).

Because his manuscript never arrives at its final destination, because therefore the final draft is not read, it remains open-ended and inconclusive. Yet Oscar has already confirmed to Lola in a letter that a manuscript exists. Because the manuscript exists, he also exists as an author; therefore Caribbean authors are not the product of a hypertrophied imagination. Junot Díaz reminds us that violence and oppression do not depend solely on representation. This departs from the popular assumption that all writers are intellectuals with a social commitment for the nation’s well being; that writing is an individual act by which the author helps to reinstall fairness and equality in a culturally cohesive society. Junot Díaz begs to differ. Not only he makes Yunior, Oscar and Abelard writings dependent on each other but their writings are inconsequential to the nation or to a moral purpose. None of them write with a social or moral purpose, they rather obey their instincts and personal desires.
*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* invites the reader to reassess the importance of the individual character and the idea that nothing has been pre-determined, even when circumstantial evidence points to the contrary. Characters remain fragmented throughout the story, yet they gain complexity even despite their historical inscriptions.

By layering and connecting different experiences of oppression and violence Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* educates the reader beyond the reach of historical discourse and makes evident that not only does historical discourse have its limitations but that it should not be considered decisive when making cultural claims of any kind. Díaz’s novel sensitizes readers to circumstances that are not often linked together historically except by a few specialized scholars. Only when the characters come to acknowledge each other’s subjectivity, are they able to form community beyond a shared discourse of power and oppression.

At the end of the story the reader learns that Lola’s daughter has, on a string around her neck, three azabaches,21 pertaining respectively to Lola, Oscar and Belicia, which will protect her “against the Eye”. In other words the “Eye” becomes the visual and mythological representations of the Caribbean that prevents us to be willing to know it ourselves. In this sense as well as in others, Junot Díaz is a new kind of Caribbean writer. His language is new. His emphasis in dictatorships as a personal and unrepresentable trauma is new. New also, finally, is his particular vision of the “real” Caribbean, a Caribbean that as he claims in an interview goes beyond “dictatorships or the consequence of total power” and that “doesn’t get discussed on a rational, coherent level but in the underworld of our imagination” (Jaggi).

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21 Azabache is a fossil considered to have magical qualities that protect people against all evil.
CHAPTER 5 CREOLISMS FOR CONTEMPORARY TIMES

“I needed a far more creolized Caribbean voice, a voice that could be comfortable talking about the Trujillato and equally comfortable enumerating all the different minions of Sauron.”

Junot Díaz

Switching codes, translating back and forth, becomes a characteristic of life in Caribbean culture; cultural capital is tied to linguistic fluency and translation.

Edwin Gentzler

This chapter discusses how Junot Díaz, Edwidge Danticat and Julia Alvarez disrupt normative uses of language in their texts in order to reconsider Caribbean identity apart from a colonial history that divided it into separate and autonomous linguistic regions. Language has always been a contested signifier in the Caribbean that represents both the indelible mark of foreign intervention as well as the weapon to resist its influence. In the middle of this virtual impasse lie the claims to a Caribbean identity forever divided by a loyalty either toward one’s own nation or towards the colonizing power. This loyalty is expressed through language. With their fictional accounts of dictatorial experiences, Díaz, Danticat and Alvarez, introduce visual and textual disruptions that challenge the ideological hold that language has on the Caribbean imagination. By visual disruptions I mean the way in which these narratives question the significance of the written discourse through the use, or reference to, images, landscapes or visual features in the story. Textual disruptions are the thematic and syntactical use of linguistic changes that interrupt monolithic assumptions of identity and can take on different forms, such as translations, code-switching and literary gaps.

If the normative use of language (and cultural discourse) is measured by its textual practices, then Junot Díaz, Edwidge Danticat and Julia Alvarez’s linguistic (and visible) disruptions in the text, convey creative and alternative responses to cultural inscriptions of
dictatorial regimes in the Caribbean. Linguistic disruptions make Caribbean dictatorial regimes visible and open to discussion. I suggest that the textual and linguistic disruptions in these texts reveal a concern with form, structure and language that further advances the idea of a Trans-Caribbean Poetics.

**The Politics of Language**

In October 1937 Rafael Leónidas Trujillo ordered the execution of all the Haitian population living on the Dominican border of the Dajabón River (also known as The Massacre River). Allegedly, he uttered the final solution\(^{22}\) for the Haitian problem while drunk at a party held in his honor, not far from where the events took place. Over a span of approximately five days (from 2 October 1937 to 8 October 1937) Dominican troops, civilians and local authorities killed people of a presumably Haitian heritage by whatever means at hand: guns, machetes, clubs and knives. It is said that the victimizers would hold up a sprig of parsley and ask for its name. Those who could not pronounce the Spanish word *perejil* became targets for the vicious mobs that proceeded to kill perhaps 30,000 people.

I use the word “allegedly” and the phrase “it is said” because the details, gravity or range of the killings were belittled and obscured by both the Haitian and Dominican governments of the time. The problem of the genocide was “resolved” through an economic agreement in which the Haitian government of Stenio Vincent abandoned all proceedings in international court in

\(^{22}\) “In the months leading up to the horrible deed, Trujillo had tightened his ties with Nazi Germany. He publicly accepted a gift of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, whose racial theories clearly he agreed with. On September 24, 1937, the newspaper *Listin Diario* carried an editorial rhapsodizing about the attentions paid to Trujillo by two visiting Nazis at the opening that day of the Dominican-German Institute of Science: “Long live our illustrious leaders, the Honorable President, Doctor Trujillo, and the Führer of the German Reich, Adolf Hitler” (Wucker 1999, 51-52). Ironically, after the massacre, Trujillo brought Jewish refugees from Germany under Hitler. This apparent act of good will hid Trujillo’s real intentions: to further his “whitening” crusade among Dominicans through interracial marriages and paliate international opinion after the Parsley Massacre, particularly that of the United States, which at the moment was trying to stay out of the conflict.
exchange for a payment of $750,000.00, which was later reduced to $500,000.00. No one was ever prosecuted.

The Parsley Massacre (also known as *Kouto* and *el corte*) reveals the convergences of language, narrative and dictatorial regimes in the Caribbean. That is, not only was the genocide of Haitians and Dominicans a direct order of Trujillo, but its visibility or invisibility remains bound to cultural narratives that remain in place. As recently as May of 2009 there was a reported lynching of a Haitian man by a Dominican mob. This gruesome event reminds us of Junot Diaz’s warning mentioned previously in chapter 4, that “what he [Trujillo] wrote about the Haitian community still moves the fucking pueblo” (Danticat, 2007).

In 1937, the linguistic differences among the Spanish “perejil,” the Creole “pe’sil” and the bastardized Spanish “pewehi” reflect the differences between the ideological discourses that define what is considered local and legitimate (perejil) and foreign and illegitimate (pe’sil or pewehi). The consequences of these differences can be fatal, as in fact they were for the Haitians. For the Dominicans, by contrast, the memory of the parsley massacre is seen through linguistic practices that justify those ideological positions which separate “Haitians” from “Dominicans” and further justify the killings themselves. As Michele Wucker asserts in her essay “The River Massacre: The Real and Imagined Borders of Hispaniola,” it was through their discursive practices that Dominicans reassured themselves “that only Haitians were killed” and therefore “that the line was clearly drawn between those who were meant to live and die” (*Tikkun Magazine* Vol. 6, 1998).

In this instance, a particular use of language indicates xenophobia, or vice versa. Ideology and praxis reflect each other. In most Caribbean cultural discourse, however, diversity is praised.

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There is a contradiction, therefore, between what may be called a macro-Caribbean discourse and a micro-discourse concerning specific ethnicities. It is this contradiction that is also at the heart of the discourse of dictatorships that are the focus of this dissertation.

The events of 1937 are relevant to many of the issues I want to explore in this chapter. Many scholars have considered the ethnic, social, political and racial ramifications of the massacre. Without denying the validity of their research, I believe that these scholars are mostly concerned with uncovering “the truth” of what happened. In other words, scholars want to recover what was lost or hidden by the official version of the events as controlled by Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. This desire is understandable and justifiable. The problem is that in our search for what is lost, we literary scholars ignore what is actually in the text itself. In this manner we unknowingly perpetuate those silences that are the most pervasive and immediate effect of dictatorial regimes. Fictional and creative narratives (in the broader sense of the word) have always been an outlet to challenge official discourses concerning dictatorial regimes. However, generally, these narratives are considered authentic only if they are written by people whose lives have been directly endangered by the regime in power. Writers are classified into two distinct categories: those who remain silent about the dictatorship and those who heroically wrote about it, often at great danger to their safety.

Dictatorial regimes are marked by their suppression of opposing ideologies and their literary and cultural manifestations. Censorship and historical revisionism are common. Often dictatorial narratives permit people to evade responsibility for their acts and wrongdoings. For example, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo denied any responsibility for the Parsley Massacre, claiming that the murders were a collective response against Haitian thievery in the border. He asserted that the use of machetes, knives, picks and shovels proved that the Dominican Army was not
involved, as they regularly use guns to carry on their duties. These statements, of course, were rejected as a façade intended to mask the true authors of the crime. Nevertheless, the Dominican government never formally apologized to the Haitian population.

Seventy years later, in 2007, a similar idea was making its rounds among Dominicans. This time the discourse goes to the other extreme. The Catholic Bishop in Dajabon, Diomedes Espinal, apologized for the 1937 massacre on behalf of the Catholic Church. Controversy immediately followed. A few days later Catholic Cardinal Nicolas de Jesus Lopez Rodríguez publicly disavowed his colleague’s apology saying that “the Dominican people don’t have to ask forgiveness for the slaughters of Haitians in 1937, because Trujillo, who ordered the massacre, is already buried” (Dominican Today, 9/10/2007). Governmental officials were quick to echo Cardinal Lopez Rodríguez opinion. Dominican Ambassador Radhamés Batista (who also presides over the National Border Council) was even more explicit:

“We as a country, were also victimized by Trujillo and if we were to commit ourselves to ask forgiveness for all of his crimes, we should start by addressing the crimes committed against our own Dominican country, the most notorious example being the [murders of] the Mirabal Sisters” (El Nuevo Diario, 10/10/2007).

These controversies attest to the problematic legacies of dictatorial regimes. Stories and experiences of dictatorship are bound by historical contingencies and their respective discourses. Literature helps us to trace cultural memories, but sometimes our obsession with “the truth” leads us to favor certain experiences over others. In sum, we become so concerned with filling in the silences and gaps that dictatorships create, that we forget to think about the texts

24 Julia Álvarez rose to fame as an author with the novelized biography of the Mirabal Sister’s In the Time of the Butterflies.
themselves and their problems or inconsistencies. The Trans-Caribbean authors of this dissertation adopt a different strategy: they maintain silences and gaps in their narratives, as part of their aesthetic practices.

**Creolization without the Creole Languages**

There is of course a problematic relation between power and language in the Caribbean. On one hand the standardization of language was in many cases parallel to the colonial enterprise. Language was culturally inscribed as a principal means to dominate and control the foreign other. The first grammar of the Spanish language, for example, was published by Antonio de Nebrija in the same year that Christopher Columbus set foot on American land. In the introduction to his book *Spanglish*, Ilans Stavans reminds us that "the first official full-length dictionary of the Spanish Language was also a 17th century by-product" (27), a compilation made by a student of the Universidad de Salamanca: Sebastian de Covarrubias. Both the grammar and the dictionary complemented each other. The grammar imposed an aesthetic standard to which the new colonies would need to adjust and be measured against; the dictionary delimited the ways in which words could be used. The ultimate consequence of both is that the communicative function of language is restricted rather than freed.

Former French and English colonies in the Caribbean share a similar history to their Spanish speaking counterparts. The different Creole vernaculars common to many Caribbean countries were dismissed in favor of European languages. Even when there were no Creole vernaculars to speak of, language became imbued by notions of purity that rejected the multilingual (and multimodal) literacies of the Caribbean subject. Ironically while Creole languages and code switching attested for the transnational realities of the Caribbean in cross-
cultural conversations, these practices were considered too informal to represent adequately the complexity of Caribbean poetics.

Language, understood in its idiomatic sense, is often a point to elaborate and challenge Caribbean poetics from a transnational perspective. In a provocative essay published in 1998, Maryse Condé proposed that the future of Caribbean Creole languages in a time characterized by “the massive migration of the peoples of the Caribbean” is “to welcome the dissolution of the forced marriage between poetics and politics, the consequences of which have been ineffective if not disastrous” (Balutansky and Sourieau 108). Condé’s proposal, entitled “Créolité without the Creole Language?” is a direct response toward the Martinican school of Créolité, whose writers, she denounces, have “not yet extricated themselves from the “victim stasis” which Wilson Harris has denounced”(108). This literary movement, developed by writers Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant, strived to overturn the linguistic dominance of colonial powers, in particular, the use of French as the language of culture and literature in the French Caribbean. In their attempts to revalorize Creole over European aesthetic norms imposed by colonial education, however, they ended by “essentializing” creole and identifying it with a single national Caribbean identity. This move is one of reductionism. Maryse Condé proposes instead, to understand Creole identity as a de-centering strategy and historical reality, that is, as in the massive migration of the peoples of the Caribbean which is characteristic of the region to the end of this century (108). Her proposal accounts for the cultural and national contributions of Trans-Caribbean authors that write in non-Creole languages such as English and, reveal an ideological shift that broadens—not narrows—Caribbean cultural discourse.

Because linguistic choices are essential to broaden Caribbean cultural discourse beyond its customary constraints, it is important to address why all three authors discussed in this
research use English to write their stories. Although the English language bears the mark of imperial occupation, I believe that in using English, Diaz, Danticat and Alvarez denounce the pervasive role “national” languages (whether French, Spanish or Creole) have in the development of authoritarian discourse of power. While the English language was central to colonial enterprises in the Caribbean—much like the Spanish and French languages—its use did not became a signifier of cultural and/or racial purity. Although France and Spain have official institutions commissioned to regulate language, (L’Académie française and La real academia de la lengua española respectively) the English language has no similar institutions.²⁵ In this sense, English is different from Spanish and French, because it followed a practical (rather than ideological) approach to colonial intervention. In Spanish and French colonial possessions, language was considered to be the best way to establish a distinct identity between colonizers and colonized.

These authors also use English as a way to attest their own personal journeys in a language that they can claim as their own. There is also the fact that English is an incomplete platform, what Edwidge Danticat identifies as an act of personal translation and creative collaboration with the place she was in (Bookbrowse). By using English, they are able to negotiate a new space in their own terms. Furthermore by using English, Danticat, Díaz and Alvarez deemphasize the familiar by integrating otherness.

²⁵ While there is no English language academy, there are recognized standards for language. In England, for example, The Oxford Dictionary (sponsored by Oxford University) is generally established as the oldest standard for grammar and form. In the United States, Webster’s Dictionary (named after American lexicographer Noah Webster) fulfills similar duties.
Translating Dictatorial Regimes

Julia Alvarez, Junot Díaz and Edwidge Danticat pick up where Condé’s argument leaves off. Questions related to art as imitation, the function of writers in society and the relation between power and the written word are recast as questions that transcend linguistic allegiances. As mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, these authors make a conscious decision to interrupt the normal course or unity of linear narratives. These disruptions have important implications for the cultural inscription of dictatorial regimes in the Caribbean. Their dictatorial narratives reconsider Caribbean cultures from a transnational perspective that necessarily influence the use of language itself.

Like Maryse Condé, Junot Díaz and Julia Alvarez, Edwidge Danticat favor the comparative and transnational rather than the local in their stories. These authors use English to narrate the dictatorial experiences of the French and Spanish Caribbean. The use of English diminishes the burden of historical and geographical contexts common to dictatorial narratives and creates a new theoretical space that is not defined by language, politics or nations but is broad enough to include cultural negotiations based on the awareness that dictatorships and oppressive governments are not confined to the Caribbean. In an interview concerning the novel The Dew Breaker, Edwidge Danticat chose to explain the implications of power and language when writing about Caribbean dictatorial regimes:

The title is my English translation of a Creole expression “choukèt laroze,” which during the twenty-nine year period (1957 – 1986) that Haiti was ruled by the father and son dictators, François “Papa Doc” and Jean Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, referred to a rural chief, a brutal regional leader and sometime torturer. I have always been fascinated by the poetic naming of such a despicable authority figure and when I started writing about a former torturer, I decided to translate the expression in the most serene sounding way I could. I could have chosen several other ways to translate this, the dew shaker, the dew stomper, for example, but I like the way the words dew breaker echo the American expression ball breaker, which is more fitting label for these kinds of people (Bookbrowse).
Edwidge Danticat pays attention to the aesthetic qualities of the text in relation to discursive practices in Caribbean culture. By using “serene sounding” names in English to convey the poetic naming of tonton macoutes in Creole, Danticat underscores the ways in which language normalizes dictatorial experiences in cultural discourses. Not surprisingly, she conveys these ideas through her own translation practices.

Translation theory provides us with a framework that I find particularly useful for exploring the social, cultural and ideological aspects of language, especially in relation with some of the questions posed by this dissertation. The process of translation has two main aspects (linguistic and cultural) and two corresponding ideals (fidelity and fluency). Fidelity refers to the accuracy that conveys the meaning of the source text in the translation. Fluency refers to how the translated text responds to its socio-cultural context. These two ideas need not be mutually exclusive, yet they are complicated by the emphasis either on the source of the translation or on the targeted audience.

The most common ideas regarding Caribbean literature present us with a similar problem. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, dictatorial narratives, even those supposed to be fictional, are expected to be accurate representations of Caribbean history. In this context, accuracy is close to the notion of fidelity and, as such, dictatorial narratives are presumed to have a moral meaning for those living within the regime as well as for those who are beyond its reach. Ironically, the zealous emphasis on faithful and accurate representations of particular cases neglects the cultural (and textual) extent of dictatorial regimes in the Caribbean.

When trying to assess a Trans-Caribbean poetics through translation, as a theme and as a practice, it becomes necessary to address the “cultural turn” in translation studies. This term, coined by Susan Bassnet and André Lefevere in the early 90’s, implies a shift in translation from
a formalist phase to the analysis of the text as a negotiation between both the source of the translation and the targeted audience:

a study of the processes of translation combined with the praxis of translating, could offer a way of understanding how complex manipulative textual processes take place (…) for a translation always takes place in a continuum, never in a void, and there are all kinds of textual and extratextual constraints upon the translator (Bassnett 1998, 123).

The theoretical framework of translation helps us to see narratives as the culmination of a negotiation process within a social, linguistic and cultural continuum, which in turn mitigates the effects of typically assigned allegorical or transcendental meanings. In terms of my own research, the idea and practice of translation within the stories treated here, sheds light on those dictatorial experiences that remain hidden by the commonplaces of literary representation. As many scholars have begun to realize, “the study of translation is the study of cultural interaction” (Gentzler 1998). Only within the space were cultural interaction takes place are we able to address the dichotomy (common to Caribbean and postcolonial studies) between so called foreigners and locals.

Recent translation theories reveal both ends of this dichotomy as cultural and linguistic strategies that answer to a corresponding ideology. In The Translator’s Invisibility, for example, Lawrence Venuti labels these strategies “domestication” and “foreignization.” Broadly speaking, domestication refers to the fluency of the translated text in the target language. A domesticated translation necessarily produces the illusion of transparency and unmediated access to the text (and author) being translated, but simultaneously eclipses the translator, who becomes subordinated to the author. Foreignization, which is Venuti’s favored translation strategy, involves “a recognition of the cultural and social conditions of language and a projection of a translation practice that takes them into account instead of working to conceal them” (95), but
sacrifices fluency to do so. This strategy assumes the subjectivity of all the individuals invested in the production of a literary text, which in itself is rarely transcendental and universal.

Venuti’s thesis is important because it recognizes the existence of ethnocentric cultural and linguistic valorizations that have direct narrative and aesthetic implications. Like Venuti, Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz and Julia Alvarez treat both ends of this foundational dichotomy as textual strategies that imply an ideological position. The uses of translation as a recurrent theme and/or practice within these stories reveal this common concern. However, we also need to ask: what qualifies as a translation? Translation practices in these stories do not necessarily conform to the production of an equivalent or alternative text. In most cases translation refers to isolated words or phrases, randomly chosen and scattered all through the stories.

Examples of such uses of translation can be found in any of these stories. In Julia Alvarez’s *Finding Miracles*, even the main character’s name is translated at the end: from Milly to Milagros, thus translating not only the book’s title but also the title of the chapter in which the transformation takes place. Translating acts emphasize a Trans-Caribbean poetics that implies cultural negotiations. In this tenth chapter of the novel, Milly realizes that: “I loved this country. But I missed home. I was looking forward to going back to Ralston. First, though, I wanted to share this place, where I had found a *familia* of friends, with my family” (227). The importance of translation lies in the acknowledgment of multiple and different cultural orders. *Familia* and family although sharing textual space and being cognates, are marked differently: one word is in italics, the other is not. These visual markings, which include the use of italics, boldface, lowercase or capital letters, attest to the common and consistent use of translation as a practice that is not restricted to a particular language or culture.

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26 In linguistics, cognates are words that share the same etymological origins in two or more languages. False cognates are words commonly thought to be related which on close linguistic examination reveal they are unrelated.
Although translation practices in the text seem incidental, a thematic approach reveals that their use always implies an ideological choice, a strategy that answers to previous ideas regarding language as an expression of cultural authenticity. When Milly’s friend Jake, decides to run for class president, he recruits Milly, Pablo and Mel to help him with his campaign. They all collaborate by creating posters with a variety of political slogans and catchphrases to obtain the votes of the students at school:

One poster showed a picture of Jake looking off into the Green Mountains: **JAKE FOR THE EARTH’S SAKE.** (This to win the “green” granola vote.) Pablo made one showing Jake wearing a *sombrero* with a bandanna tied around his neck: **JAKE: UN HOMBRE SINCERO.** (Everyone kept asking him what it meant, so Pablo wrote the translation in tiny print below the caption: Jake: an honest man (95).

In the posters, language becomes instrumental to create the appearance of a convenient truth. Catchphrases render language and ideas familiar and ordinary, so as to appeal to the vote or to particular audiences like the green “granola” students. The political slogans are trite, derived from causes that, although commendable, do not necessarily “translate” to the school context. Yet they are represented in boldface and consumed in bulk:

Em and I did one [poster] together. We took a photo of Jake surrounded by some posters and bumper stickers of his favorite causes: **SAVE THE WHALES. DON’T LAUGH AT FARMERS WITH YOUR MOUTH FULL. PEACE IS NOT SOMETHING TO DIE FOR. LOVE MAKES A FAMILY. TAKE VERMONT FORWARD.** Our caption read: **VOTE FOR JAKE, A LOT’S A STAKE** (95).

Meanwhile, Pablo’s role as a translator literally is represented as “tiny print.” This, of course, happens because Pablo’s undermines his own neutral position of in-betweeness in the process of translation and instead favors his target audience, the voting students. Here translation becomes a mere instrumental process that provides easy access to foreign linguistic (and cultural) codes, rather than remaining the complex space of cultural negotiation.
Alvarez reveals the simplicity of language in relation to political intentions and discourses, whether large or small. The instrumentality of language within the context of school elections continues in the broader context of the elections held at “el paisito.” Waiting for her family to arrive, Milly ponders on the implications of linguistic choices:

We were waiting for Mom and Dad’s plane on the observation deck of the Aeropuerto Internacional de la Liberación del Pueblo. Liberated names seemed to go on and on. I often wondered what would happen if I ever had to say something fast in this country (226).

Milly acknowledges the importance of language in creating an ideological discourse but this is no impediment for her to be an active participant of such discursive creations. Just as she participates in the creation of posters with trite political slogans to help her friend win the school’s elections, so too does she becomes involved in the linguistic practices she observes. At this point in the story, her name has “been liberated” as well: she has gone from Milly to Milagros. While this shift may be interpreted as the triumph of one culture (or language) over another, I believe that in fact it underscores the process of negotiating cultural identities. For instance, this passage appears in the chapter entitled “finding miracles.” Milly can only find herself if she accounts for all the fragments that compose her story: “How did I say it to my parents? “It’s like… I found…Milagros. I mean, I’m still me, Milly…but now, I’m more me” (248). In addition, there are several cues to this cultural negotiation in the font style used in the text, which I argue, is consistent with the textual aesthetics of the other authors discussed in this dissertation. The chapter’s titles, for example, are all written in lowercase letters. There is no emphasis on either culture or language, but only on the evidence of the characters’ “in-between-ness.” Pablo and Milly’s quest leads them to embrace their hyphenated identities:
Of course, he would know. He had looked so out of place that day in January when he stood in front of our class. “We are—what is it Jake and all of you call yourselves? The border people?”
“The borderliners.”
“Sí, los borderliners.” Pablo wove his fingers together. “We hold the worlds together. Without us”—he drew them apart—“everything falls apart” (232).

In The Translation Zone: A Comparativist Approach (2006) Emily Apter describes translation as a theoretical space that is not constrained by language, politics or nation. This paradigm is useful for an understanding of how Trans-Caribbean authors discuss translation in their dictatorial narratives, but refuse to explain everything. The key is that Trans-Caribbean narratives are less concerned with the theoretical aspects of translation than they are with its practical uses. In their dictatorial narratives Trans-Caribbean authors assert the importance of gaps, and the limits of language, to shape alternative and creative responses that break hegemonic illusions. This is why translation is only one among many practices, within a Trans-Caribbean poetics, that help to demonstrate transcultural\textsuperscript{27} processes.

**Interpreting the Trans-Caribbean: A Polyphony of Experiences**

Code-switching\textsuperscript{28} complements the translation framework provided by Trans-Caribbean poetics because it asserts the relevance of multilingual practices that coexist alongside the aesthetic demands imposed by the foreign other. I believe that code-switching also accounts for the oral practices that remain a distinctive tradition of the Caribbean\textsuperscript{29} and which continuously

\textsuperscript{27} I use the term transculturation as it was coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azucar* (1940). In his proposal Ortiz denounced the ethnocentrism of anthropological language, which applied moral and normative judgments of value to the study of cultural encounters and interactions.

\textsuperscript{28} My personal preference is to spell code-switching with a hyphen, a practice I will follow through in this research. The original spelling will be preserved in quotations and when paraphrasing scholars who routinely use a different spelling.

\textsuperscript{29} It should be noted that this paper examines code-switching in the written discourse which entails a different ideological project than the one expressed through the immediacy of regular conversation.
provide for additional venues of contact with other cultures. Historically dismissed by scholars other than linguists, code-switching is slowly but steadily gaining the attention of literary scholars and cultural studies specialists as it points to one of the most fruitful zones of cross-cultural contact.

Despite its importance, “code-switching” remains a contested term, mainly because scholars do not seem to agree on whether “code” refers to language, dialect, style or intonation of speech (prosodic register). The controversy surrounding the term becomes more acute when the distinction is made by some scholars between code-switching and language alternation, as two different ways of thinking about language output, where the first term (code-switching) refers to communicative function and, the second term (language alternation) refers to grammatical forms. The excessive concern with the quantitative analysis of syntactical and linguistic features makes the debates around code switching resemble those found in translation theory discussed earlier in this chapter.

Since I want to explore how code-switching help us to make sense of the ideological and social connections between diverse linguistic practices (such as Creole and Spanglish) within a larger dominant idiomatic context (such as English, Spanish or French), my definition of the term is largely informed by sociocultural linguistics. Research within this branch of linguistic studies concerns itself with the interdisciplinary study of language, culture and society. In terms of this research the sociocultural linguistics approach allows me to consider why code-switching occurs and what the social and cultural implications of their use are on talk in interaction and on written discourse.

Chad Nilep (2006) identifies three main areas or approaches on code-switching within sociocultural linguistics: the social psychological approach of Carol Myers-Scotton’s
markedness model, identity and code switching and, interaction and code switching. Each one of these models proposes code-switching as a choice based on different ideas. Myers-Scotton’s markedness model, for example, proposes code-switching as a type of “skilled performance” in which a speaker chooses one language over the other as a way to assert different social roles within a particular context. In the second approach, however, issues of race, ethnicity, social and economic class and language dominance mark the use of code-switching in conversation. Monica Hellers, for example, considers code-switching a political strategy used by subordinate groups to “resist or redefine the value of symbolic resources in the linguistic marketplace” (Nilep 2006). Finally, the third approach, code-switching “on talk interaction”, examines the interactional and cognitive functions of code-switching through conversational analysis.

The importance of code-switching within socio-cultural linguistics lies in the idea of a linguistic choice. To this day, the use of code-switching implies, for many, a hierarchical structure based on notions of authenticity and cultural dominance. This hierarchical structure works in different levels and ultimately “marks” its user as an ethnic minority that will always be in an inferior or victimized position in relation to its context. The negative connotations commonly associated with code-switching refer to the idea of language deterioration, where code-switching is perceived as a step toward cultural assimilation. Within this paradigm, language is thought of in terms of a linear development that leads to a final stage where it becomes stable. From that moment little or no changes occur.

Ideas concerning language development as a linear process inform research in both code-switching and Creole languages. Scholars continuously reassert these paradigms, even when they attempt to vindicate the communities and individuals associated with their use. Ana Luisa Zentella’s *Growing Up Bilingual* (1997) argues that code switching is commonly charged with
“language deterioration and/or the creation of a new language” which has important socio-cultural implications for poor Spanish-speaking communities in the United States. Zentella’s comments on how code-switching and other linguistic practices help to define and distinguish the members of a particular ethnic group are shared by most students of Creole languages. A brief and general overview of the most common theories regarding the origins of Creole languages reveals a strong leaning toward notions of authenticity and reinstates the internal hierarchies that inform language research. This becomes evident in the general theoretical classifications established by Arends, Muysken & Smith (1995): Theories focusing on European Input, Theories focusing on non-European Input, Gradualist and Developmental Hypotheses and Universalist Approaches. These four classifications refer to the possible origins of Creole languages. Within these classifications, sub-classifications such as “The Monogenetic Theory of Pidgins and Creoles,” “Foreigner talk,” “Baby Talk;” and “Imperfect L2 Learning,” reinforce the paradigm of superior versus inferior languages based on their socio-cultural relevance and precedence.

Linguistic practices such as code-switching and certain languages such as Creole become then, almost invariably a way to determine the cultural authenticity of its users. The more you use them, the farthest you are from a dominant culture. This is true for talk in interaction or written practices of code-switching. Laura Callahan explains that during the initial phase of research for Spanish/English Codeswitching in a Written Corpus (2004):

Moreover, when written codeswitching between Spanish and English in the United States was mentioned, it was often dismissed as inauthentic, artificial. The work of some poets who used codeswitching was deemed contrived, full of sequences that would not be heard in speech. The fact that poetic language is often distinct from everyday language seemed to have been overlooked. Fiction writers who used codeswitching in their characters’ dialogue were assumed to be merely imitating, not always in a very accurate manner, what might be uttered in
actual conversation. The fact that such authors might alternate languages not only in dialogue but also in their own narrative was never addressed (1).

Callahan reminds us that ideas concerning linguistic dominance transcend form and context. As such, creative or syntactical attempts to dispute the use of language as a sign of cultural authenticity fall short. In response to theories that understand language either as a grammatical system or as a mere socio-cultural construct, Julia Alvarez, Edwidge Danticat and Junot Díaz emphasize code-switching as an ability (rather than as an impediment) that denotes both a linguistic choice and a conscious intention grounded on real life-experiences. In this sense, code-switching (like Creole languages) transcends the specificity of the context where these practices take place and become a fundamental trait of a new way to understand the function of language in a Trans-Caribbean context. Julia Alvarez, for example, considers the social and cultural ramifications of a Dominican-American who writes in English in her essay “Doña Aída, with Your Permission.” In that essay Julia Alvarez considers why language remains such an essential marker of cultural authenticity and proposes both in her argument and in her code-switching, to embrace, what she identifies as the “synthesizing consciousness” of the Caribbean:

“Think of it, The Caribbean… a string of islands, a sieve of the continents, north and south, a sponge, as most islands are, absorbing those who come and go, whether indios in canoas from the Amazon, or conquistadores from Spain, or African princesses brought in chains in the hold of ships to be slaves, or refugees from China or central Europe or other islands. We are not a big continental chunk, a forbidding expanse that takes forever to penetrate, which keeps groups solidly intact, for a while anyhow. Our beaches welcome the stranger with their carpets of white sand. In an hour you reach the interior; in another hour you arrive at the other coast. We are islands, permeable countries. It’s in our genes to be a world made of many worlds. ¿No es así? (Alvarez 1998, 175)

When Julia Alvarez uses code-switching she reasserts her Caribbean roots outside of the geographical constraints imposed by language. She is “mapping a country that’s not on the map, and that’s why I’m trying to put it down on paper” (173). This idea of a country that is not in the
map reminds us of the unnamed country, el paisito in *Finding Miracles*. Even if she uses a specific historical context such as the Trujillo’s dictatorship, she uses language in a way that undermines both the dictatorship and language as a discourse of cultural authenticity. For Alvarez “Spanish had its many tongues” (21) composed of the “educated español my parents’ families spoke,” the bad Spanish of the maids, “a lilting animated campuno, ss swallowed, endings chopped off, funny turns of phrases” (21), and “the castellano from Padre Joaquin” (21). From all of these tongues she chooses the campuno Spanish from the “campesinas” as her “mother tongue,” which in turn defies the dictator as the “father of the nation.” In *Before we were Free*, for example, Chucha (the family maid) who “has a tendency to mumble and mix in Haitian words with her Spanish” (50) and talks in riddles, is the only character with insight about the future. Chucha’s code-switching and riddle-talk eventually become Ana and her family’s future: they flee to the United States and start talking in riddles too: Spanglish becomes their language.

In contrast, English is a language of transgression. In “My English,” one of her essays included in *Something to Declare*, Alvarez mentions that English was the favored language whenever her parents did not want them to know anything:

> Besides all these versions of Spanish, every once in a while another strange tongue emerged from my papi’s mouth or my mami’s lips. What I first recognized was not a language, but a tone of voice, serious, urgent, something important and top secret being said, some uncle in trouble, someone divorcing, someone dead. *Say it in English so the children won’t understand.* I would listen, straining to understand, thinking that this was not a different language but just another and harder version of Spanish. *Say it in English so the children won’t understand.* From the beginning English was the sound of worry and secrets, the sound of being left out (22).

Rather than presenting English as a language that represents a different culture or ideology, Alvarez underscore the communicative function of language; the urgency of the overall message
and how both parents use it as a code. In this sense English becomes a strategic code-switching that emphasizes the skills of its users. English becomes a “harder version of Spanish,” that is, a continuation of Spanish rather than its ideological or cultural opposition. Alvarez keeps on toying with the idea when she claims that speaking in English with her sisters later on gave all of them “an edge over our strict, Spanish-speaking parents” (6). The educated “español” of her parents becomes a language of definitions that can be overruled by plotting in English. In the Time of the Butterflies has a similar moment when Dede Mirabal defines her sister Patria through her religious faith because she is “used to this fixed monolithic language around interviewers and mythologizers of her sisters” (7). Moreover, when Julia Alvarez writes about Caribbean dictatorial narratives in English she somehow conspires against the normative functions of language that perpetuate violence.

Language loses its ability to define the role of the characters in Alvarez’s stories but gains validity as a strategy against oppression. Mr. Washburn, the American ambassador who speaks in English, becomes one of the main conspirators, with Anita’s father; against Trujillo in Before we were Free, this in clear opposition to the role of foreign characters in novels of dictatorship. Likewise, when Trujillo calls Anita’s sister, presumably with the intention to court her, Mrs. Washburn handles the unexpected and undesired call by misleading the caller with “her bad Spanish” (69). In fact, if I were to make any association between language and characters in the story, it would be that all the characters who oppose Trujillo are exposed to more than one language in the story and are unsure how to manage any of them. Sammy Washburn claims that he “never do good in English and it’s my native language” (23); Mrs. Brown is more patient with Oscar Mancini (Anita’s love interest) than with the rest of “native” Dominicans because he is
half-Dominican, half-Italian and presumably has problems understanding both English and Spanish.

Like Alvarez, Edwidge Danticat explores in her dictatorial narratives, the strategic function of language in the Caribbean and its possible ramifications. In one of her earliest essays\(^\text{30}\), published in 1996, she briefly articulates the history of the Caribbean through language and suggests the role of code-switching and Creole in it:

The women who came before me were women who spoke half of one language and half another. They spoke the French and Spanish of their captors mixed in with their own African language. These women seemed to be speaking in tongue when they prayed to their old gods, the ancient African spirits. Even though they were afraid that their old deities would no longer understand them, they invented a new language our Creole patois with which to describe their new surroundings, a language from which colorful phrases blossomed to fit the desperate circumstances. When these women greeted each other, they found themselves speaking in codes.

How are we today, Sister?  
-I am ugly, but I am here (The Caribbean Writer 1996).

Language is never complete, pure or innocent. It is a creative and alternative attempt at communication (colorful phrases blossom) when one language does not suffice to meet the needs of all people involved in the conversation. Moreover, Danticat concedes that the phrase *we are ugly but we are here* might upset “the aesthetic images of most women, thus explaining language in aesthetic terms. Language becomes a “code” people use in desperate circumstances (such as dictatorial regimes). This idea reappears in the story 1937 (Krik? Krak!), where a secret society of women, all of them survivors of the Parsley massacre (hence the title) recognize themselves through a special code:

   “Who are you?” I asked her.  
   “I am a child of that place,” she answered. “I come from that long trail of blood.”  
   “Where are you going?”  
   “I am walking into the dawn.”  
   “Who are you?”

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\(^{30}\) Danticat, Edwidge. “We Are Ugly but We Are Here.” *The Caribbean Writer*. Vol. 10. 1996
“I am the first daughter of the first star.”
“Where do you drink when you’re thirsty?”
“I drink from the Maddona’s eyes.”
“And if not there?”
“I drink the dew”
“And if I can’t find dew?”
“I drink from the rain before it falls.”
“If you can’t drink there?”
“I drink from the turtle’s hide”
“How did you find your way to me?”
“By the light of the mermaid’s comb.”
“Where does your mother come from?”
“Thunderbolts, lightning and all things that soar.”
“Who are you?”
“I am the flame and the spark by which my mother lived” (45).

Danticat manages to show how code-switching can be achieved even when using only one language. In this sense the story explores more than one of the possible definitions for “code” discussed earlier in this chapter. The made-up code starts with questions rather than assertions, as if to challenge the normative function of discourse. The nature of the questions is as relevant as the code itself. The most common question that appears in the exchange concerns identity (who are you?), then location (where are you going? Where does your mother come from?). Likewise, answers are not definite or transparent but obtuse. The exchange helps the daughter of one of the women recognize other “daughters of the river” (44) and to see her mother beyond the circumstances she lived through, both as a survivor of the massacre and a prisoner in her own land:

Then the story came back to me as my mother has often told it. On that day so long ago, in the year nineteen hundred and thirty-seven, in the Massacre River, my mother did fly. Weighted down by my body inside hers, she leaped from Dominican soil into the water, and out again on the Haitian side of the river. She glowed red when she came out, blood clinging to her skin, which at that moment looked as though it were in flames (49).

The lyricism of the answers, that speak of an impossible imagery, a landscape of sorts, coupled with the strategic and de-centering effect of language; further sustain the emergence of a Trans-
Caribbean poetics that extends to the future. This type of exchange will be used in other stories included in *Krik? Krak!* These answers create an alternative mythology to the discourse created by domestic political regimes and their oppression.

Edwidge Danticat addresses the intersections between oral and written code-switching and their overall communicative effects in *The Dew Breaker’s “Water Child.”* The story revolves around Nadine Osnac, a Haitian nurse and the sole member of her family in the United States who struggles to telephone her family in Haiti after aborting her child while simultaneously helping a patient cope with the loss of her voice after undergoing a laryngectomy.

In the story code-switching remains a strategic choice. Eric, her former lover and father of Nadine’s nearly born child calls her once a month since they broke up:

“Alo, allo, hello,” he stammered, creating his own odd pauses between Creole, French and English, like the electively mute, newly arrived immigrant children whose worried parents brought them to the ward for consultations, even though there was nothing wrong with their vocal cords.”

“Just saying hello to you.” He chose heavily accented English. Long pause.

“Okay. Bye” (56).

Eric’s choice of “heavily accented English” seeks an emotional response from Nadine. His intentions toward her are murky, to say the least. In the story that precedes “Water Child” entitled “Seven,” the reader learns that Eric, is in fact, married:

He told Dany not to mention those nights out again. His wife wasn’t to know that he’d ever done anything but work his two jobs, as a night janitor at Medgar Evers College and a day janitor at King’s County Hospital. And she was never to find out about those women who’d occasionally come home with him in the early-morning hours. Those women, most of whom had husbands, boyfriends, fiancés, and lovers in other parts of the world, never meant much to him anyway. (38)

But Nadine doesn’t respond to Eric messages. Instead she adds the microcassettes of her answering machine with Eric’s messages to the shrine she has made for her unborn child.
The only other Haitian nurse in the Ear, Nose and Throat ward, Josette, came to Brooklyn early in her childhood and speaks English with no accent at all. In the story, however, “she liked to throw in a Creole word here and there in conversation to flaunt her origins” (55). Josette performs her culture through language, as it is suggested by the verb “flaunt,” which reminds us of Myers-Scotton definition of code-switching: a type of “skilled performance with communicative intent” (Myers-Scotton 1993, 6). Although Nadine Osnac remains socially and emotionally distant from her peers in the hospital, the story implies that Josette “still occasionally ventured a social invitation, since they were both from the same country and all” (59). Josette, then, presumes language to be an immediate cultural (and social) connection. Nadine, however, rejects Josette’s and sides with her voiceless but feisty patient Ms. Hinds. When Ms. Hinds suffers a nervous breakdown after realizing that she lost her voice, Nadine, who has her own share of silences (she hasn’t spoken with her parents back in Haiti since her abortion) is the only one able to calm her. Both women bond by overcoming their silences. After Nadine shows Ms. Hind that she can communicate with others by writing, she goes home and speaks to her parents for the first time in months. Their bond is not emotional but grounded on the rational acknowledgment of similar experiences that transcend cultural or linguistic affiliations.

Rather than defining it through particular practices, Trans-Caribbean authors understand code-switching in its broadest sense. Junot Díaz, for example, claims that there is no Spanglish in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, but that readers would “find a lot of code-switching, which is the great American idiom” (Bermeo). In his view, code-switching rather than language becomes a way to communicate a new Trans-Caribbean aesthetics that challenges passive and invisible forms of consumption:
I think I make the values explicit. There’s nothing like making values explicit to have the people questioning their system of values. Think about it. Nobody will admit that they have certain hierarchies of beauty locked in their head. But nothing shames or provokes people more than making those hidden values explicit. They can’t stand it when you take their hidden structures and lay them out in front of them (Other Voices 36, 2002).

Code-switching makes the invisible visible. The reader becomes aware of the role of language in discourse and how it perpetuates conditions of cultural hierarchy. While Junot Díaz criticizes canonical and hierarchical notions of beauty, the aesthetic he proposes cannot be simply defined as grotesque or antagonistic. For a long time the Caribbean has been imagined through a dialectic of opposition which, Belinda Edmondson reminds us, “is essentially the same structure used to analyze the First World-Third World relationship of the Caribbean to Europe and America,” and represents “an inadequate model for a multicultural region” (Edmonson 1994). Junot Díaz is very much aware of this dialectic of opposition and its implications. Dichotomous articulations of Caribbean culture are easily translated into cultural labels and misinterpretations

Of all the authors discussed in this research, Junot Díaz is perhaps the one who uses the most diverse examples of code-switching in his texts. Code-switching, however, is used in its broadest sense. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* alternates among many non-standard speeches such as Ebonics, Spanglish, A-prefixing, New York variety, “nerdboy talk,” Latin and the Dominican campuno Julia Alvarez referred to earlier. In addition to language practices, code-switching also refers to formal and informal registers, regions, countries, genres and references such as footnotes. This strategy should not be taken lightly, as far Yunior warns us in the story, “It sounds like the most unlikely load of jiringonza on this side of the Sierra Madre. But one man’s jiringonza is another man’s life” (235).
Furthermore, in a recent interview, apropos of Achy Obejas’ translation of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz explains how code-switching and translation work together:

The translation of the book from Spanish-speckled English into English-infected Spanish required its own experiments (though, he argues, “if you think about it, it’s a piece of cake”): “What’s really driving the book is code-switching. I can’t control all the other languages but I can certainly control English and Spanish, so that all I needed to find with the Spanish translation was find an entirely different code to switch. So what we did was we translated the entire book into Spanish and then went through the entire book matching English and Spanish looking for a set of codes in English that worked really, really well in Spanish to preserve that sort of multilingual madness (The Harvard Advocate Spring 1996).

None of this is as simple as Junot Díaz perhaps would wish. In fact, the Spanish translation of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is awkward in ways that demonstrate the insurmountable difficulties of submitting to one language Trans-Caribbean texts that are the result of multicultural and multilingual interactions. In the Spanish version, the translator, Achy Obejas, includes “A note on translation” in which she explains that her footnotes are marked with brackets to distinguish them from Díaz’s footnotes and that she has “tried” to preserve the original Spanish used in the original text. This type of annotation is also common to the translated version of *Texaco*, a novel written by Patrick Chamoiseau, which Díaz has credited more than once as a source of inspiration for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*:

“In the original, the author's French translation usually follows any Creole sentence: wherever the authors' translation diverges substantially from the meaning of the Creole, we have included or own footnoted version. We distinguish our footnotes from the author's by the use of brackets. Also, please note that an asterisk signifies the first appearance of a glossary item in the text” (1998).

The purpose of the translator’s notes, however, is defeated in the afterword of the novel, where the book translator’s writes that “if you can read Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*, maybe we over-translated it.” Not even the work of two different translators (Rose Myriam Rejouis and Val...
Vinokurov) was supposed to accomplish full cultural accessibility through linguistic competence. Likewise, although she is translating from English, Achy Obejas still sometimes retains—in the Spanish text—some English, Spanglish or neologisms. Words like “fukú story” in which the word fukú is accented (6), “old school” (7) “gook” (113), “fokimonio” (116), “Crazyman” (200), “bróder” (215) “freak” (278) and “biper” (330) among others, confirms that an exclusively Spanish translation of this novel is impossible.

Linguistic practices such as translation and code-switching build on each other to satisfy a communicative intent (translation) and broaden the possible meanings of a text or discourse (code-switching). The third textual practice shared by all authors in this dissertation, however, refers to the conscious decision to keep and build silences within stories of dictatorial experiences. While leaving things for the reader to interpret on their own is a resource old as literature itself, the authors discussed in this dissertation take this idea a step further by making these moments visible in their stories. Empty blanks, suspension points, incomplete sentences, words blacked out (censored) and images of nothingness such as empty canvasses, no-faces, torn pages and arm stumps create a transition between the textual and visual disruptions common to a Trans-Caribbean poetics.

**Asserting the Fragments**

There are two important (but not unique) tendencies in the analysis of literary gaps. On one hand, scholars concerned with the intersections among trauma, culture and literature, such as Cathy Caruth, interpret gaps and ambiguity in literary narratives and films as the impossibility of translating traumatic experiences into written words. On the other, Wolfgang Iser’s considers gaps in the text an invitation to creative interaction between the text and its readers. In the
following paragraphs I explain what is useful and what is dispensable of both approaches in relation to Trans-Caribbean poetics. But before this, I think it necessary to consider the intersections among translation, code-switching and gaps in any given text, which I relate to the perception of limits in language. In fact, translation and code-switching are intrinsically related and somehow lead us to the study of literary gaps. Let me explain what I mean by this.

In translation, the term “untranslatability” exists in two forms. Linguistic untranslatability happens when the target language has no corresponding words that occur in the source language. Cultural untranslatability concerns the absence of a particular context or situation that happens in the source language text but not in the target language. Whether translation is always possible or not, translators have developed many strategies to work with a text that needs to be translated.

Strategies such as adaptation, borrowing, calque, compensation, paraphrase and translator’s notes provide us, in turn, with an unexpected link to code-switching. In early research concerning code-switching, many scholars explained this practice through some of these strategies. The premise was that code-switching happened when someone encountered a lexical, linguistic or intellectual gap that impeded a monolingual conversation. While this paradigm has now been rejected by most scholars, many of the cultural and ethnic stereotypes that emerged from these premises still persist.

31 I should note that “untranslatability” is a much contested term in translation studies, whereas it suggests the limits of the field itself and as such is strongly denied by many translation scholars.
32 Adaptation occurs when the translator replaces one word or concept in the source text with an equivalent term usual to the audience in the translated text.
33 Borrowing occurs when the translator uses a word or expression from the source text in the target text unmodified.
34 Calque refers to the idea of breaking an expression and translating it word-by-word.
35 Compensation happens when the translator uses elements or forms in the source text to inform its translation.
36 Paraphrase happens when a word of the source text is replaced, in the target text, by a whole group of words that explain a non-existent notion in the target language.
37 A translator’s note provides additional information that compensates for the untranslatability.
The question that permeates all three practices is whether language has limits and, if so, how to interpret and work with those limits. In the introduction to this dissertation, I briefly considered how Caribbean literature entertains the same questions as literature produced under extreme circumstances, such as the Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the Holocaust. This approach, like some translation and code-switching theories, begins by considering the limits of language in relation to experience. Cathy Caruth proposes that literary gaps are symptomatic of cultural trauma. These gaps, which are often accompanied by repetitions, have a fragmenting effect on the text: the message is incomplete, thus we only have access to the fragments of a presumed discourse. In an interview related to her teaching a university class, “Literature, Trauma and Culture,” Caruth mentions that, for example, “one consequence of the failure to assimilate a traumatic experience would be that things get repeated. You act out, or repeat through aggression and violence what isn’t assimilated and remain unconscious” (New York Times Dec. 22, 1991). This approach has serious implications when applied to Caribbean cultural production overall and trans-Caribbean experiences of dictatorship in particular. Fragmentation, repetition and literary gaps, the symptoms of cultural or individual illness are according to Caruth, recurring motifs and theoretical mainstays in Caribbean studies. Antonio Benítez-Rojo summarizes the Caribbean experience using the metaphor of a “repeating island.” Derek Walcott talks about fragments of an epic memory when speaking of the Caribbean. Thus, when applied to Caribbean discourse, Caruth’s proposal (and diagnosis) begins even before we analyze the story: the gaps of Caribbean dictatorial narratives only reinforce the traumatic and victimized impressions that have been determined a priori about this region and its subjects.
Within Caruth’s approach, the written text becomes the first step toward gaining normalcy as the individual starts acknowledging the trauma that up to that point has remained unconscious. While the suggestion of a “culturally sane” literary text is problematic in itself, as it reinforces cultural canons and hegemonies, the idea that when trauma remains invisible and unconscious in cultural discourse it gets “acted out” and repeated through aggression and violence remains essential for the argument of this research. On one hand, it explains why Trans-Caribbean individuals remain engaged with experiences that they experience briefly, if not at all. It also accounts for cultural patterns of oppression that remain invisible in discourse and which need to be addressed and acknowledged in order to change its dynamics. This idea is particularly relevant in the Caribbean context, given that while dictatorial regimes in the Caribbean strictly refer to an autocratic form of absolute rule unrestricted by law, the constitution or other sociopolitical factors, most dictatorial regimes were followed by authoritarian and violent governments that were nevertheless democratically elected and supported by the majority of the population.

At the other end of the spectrum, literary gaps are considered a strategy to invite creative interaction between the text and its reader. Reader-Response Theory and, in particular, the work of Wolfgang Iser, intersect in many ways with Trans-Caribbean poetics despite the fact that Iser’s discussion of gaps was mostly conceptual rather than textual. In his research Iser was mainly concerned with the interaction between the reader and the text, an interaction that he identified as the literary object or Gestalt, which is akin to the “interpretation” of the text. This interpretation (not to be confused with meaning) was the result of what the text gave the readers (plot, characters, settings) and what lefts out, whether as gaps in the narrative or as the structural limits of the text’s representation of the world. According to his theory, gaps do not occur

38 Form or shape. In English it is commonly used to refer to “wholeness.”
because of lack of information but rather because of a deficit in assessing information. In addition, Iser proposes a liminal space between readers and texts that generates effects of meaning and invites readers to participate and “live” events of meaning through reading. This theory of aesthetic response denies the dichotomy between fiction and reality, where literature transcends the constraints of experience and is akin to a Trans-Caribbean space informed by the individual and multiple interpretations of the Caribbean experience. Not surprisingly, Wolfgang Iser’s later works dwell on the nature and purpose of interpretation.

Wolfgang Iser’s theory has been challenged in many aspects. For starters, Iser proposed that each text has an ideal “implied reader,” a position that the actual reader may be unable or unwilling to occupy. The implied reader in Iser’s theory is presupposed and anticipated by the text; however, Iser fails to explain exactly how the text informs and restricts its readers. In other words, Iser’s theory seems to lack praxis. Other scholars, such as Stanley Fish, believe that the emphasis of Reader-Response Theory ultimately fall on the readers rather than on the text, whereas Iser proposed a negotiation between the two. Lastly, many scholars believe that Reader-Response theory ultimately allows for any random interpretation of the text, ultimately leading to an arbitrary and highly personalized interpretation of literature.

Both approaches are useful to analyze gaps in Trans-Caribbean narratives of dictatorship. Cathy Caruth, for example, analyzes the textual gap in literary discourse and proposes that narratives unwillingly reveal certain concealed and undesired aspects of cultural discourse. In this sense, Caruth’s research accounts for the textual effects of negative social experiences. Trans-Caribbean authors, however, propose that gaps are the result of a conscious decision that invites readers to consider their own experiences in relation to the power dynamics that continue to shape Caribbean discursive (mis)representations. Likewise, Trans-Caribbean narratives of
dictatorship take Iser’s theory one step further because gaps are visibly marked and announced in the text. This, of course, has to do with a particular Caribbean aesthetic that valorizes fragmentation, which in turn, is impossible without gaps.

The manner in which Trans-Caribbean narratives of dictatorship make gaps visible seems to be a response to the question of whether language has limits or not. An answer to this question has important textual and ideological implications. The visibility of these gaps takes on many forms. Dashes (―), for example, indicate a disrupted conversation. Julia Alvarez presents us with a good example in *Finding Miracles*:

“What orphanage?” Dad finally spoke up. “Milly, our understanding was—“
“A search is a big emotional step—“ Mom interrupted.
“To undertake by yourself—“ Dad continued through Mom’s interruption.
“We would want to be there with you—“Mom’s voice was a softer version of Dad’s (172).

There are several things happening at once in this passage. The conversation regarding Milly’s real reason to visit “el paisito” (the search for her birth origins rather than a vacation) is interrupted several times. The gaps show Milly’s parents’ emotional response to the real reasons why Milly wanted to visit el paisito, a reason that in reality was not that hard to guess, but that they decided to overlook. Her dad’s response, *our understanding was*, can be interpreted as evidence of their presumptions: Milly only wanted vacations. This presumption, by the way, challenges common practices that reduce Caribbean experiences to its landscape. The exchange also evidences the natural compulsion to fill the gaps as both mother and father rush to disrupt and complete each other ideas (Mom’s voice was a softer version of Dad’s). The text proves that competing voices and traditions do not necessarily cancel each other. In other instances, however, the gaps anteceded by dashes, persist in their mysteries. This is what happens in the scene of Oscar’s death in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*:
They waited respectfully for him to finish and then they said, their faces slowly disappearing in the gloom, Listen, we’ll let you go if you tell us what fuego means in English.
Fire, he blurted out, unable to help himself.
Oscar— (322).

There are two different kinds of gaps in the aforementioned quote. On one hand, Oscar’s assassins disappear slowly, somehow reminding us that the real domestic/national motivations of violence disappear in cultural discourse. Gaps are not limited to discourse, as they take on physical characteristics as well, such as an arm stump with ghost pain (Danticat) or an irremediable stutter (Alvarez). Oscar’s death echoes the Parsley Massacre and reminds us how the dictatorship extends beyond the dictator’s time as well. The narrative emphasis on making such gaps visible in the text offsets its negative implications.

Sometimes gaps take on corporeal forms. This is the case in Edwidge Danticat’s stories which are filled with ghosts. These absences are always familiar, like a father who died too early but still has the ability to threaten his daughters’ dreams, or a limb that causes “ghost pain”:

“Caroline went to our room and came back wearing her wedding dress and a false arm.
[...] “It does not look very real.” Ma said.
“That’s not the point, Ma!” Caroline snapped.
“I don’t understand,” Ma said.
“I often feel a shooting pain at the end of my left arm, always as though it was cut from me yesterday. The doctor said I had phantom pain.”
“What? The pain of ghosts?”
“Phantom limb pain,” Caroline explained, “a kind of pain that people feel after they’ve had their arms or legs amputated. The doctor thought this would make it go away.”
“But your arm was never cut from you,” Ma said. “Did you tell him that it was God who made you this way?”
“With all the pressure lately, with the wedding, he says that it’s only natural that I should feel amputated.”
“In that case, we all have phantom pain,” Ma said. (Krik? Krak! 198-99) [My ellipsis].
In a subtle play of concepts, images and words, Danticat asserts that pain and happiness can coexist in one person: she even uses “italics” in the connector word “and” that joins her wedding dress (symbol of hope and happiness) and the false arm (which symbolizes the pain of what is not there). It is very revealing that Caroline’s doctor (a title that is reminiscent of François Duvalier’s nickname Papa Doc)\(^{39}\) is the one who suggests the false arm to alleviate her ghost pain. Absence makes the pain more noticeable. Caroline’s body becomes an allegory for the national body. It is born incomplete, an incompletion that is presented as a mutilation, just as the incomplete national body is mutilated by dictatorship, and the pain of that mutilation is expressed through an absent limb, or through the silences in a discourse that pretends to be whole. The doctor recommends that Caroline use an artificial limb to treat her ghost pain, suggesting that it alone will suffice. In a similar way, dictatorial regimes create a false discourse of wholeness in order to conceal pain from the people.

Trans-Caribbean narratives of dictatorship acknowledge gaps to empower Caribbean subjects who have been subjected to the fictional cultural discourses created by authoritarian regimes. Characters assert their right to disrupt these discourses and decide what they want to inscribe and what not to. In the Name of Salomé, for example, presents the reader with various passages in which Salomé’s epistolary conversation with her husband, then a doctoral student in Paris, is disrupted and marked as lost with words such as “ORIGINAL ROTO” (222); “ORIGINAL INCOMPLETO” (218, 221) and “MUTILADA” (215, 232). Likewise, Anita in Before we were Free, chooses to write big X’s for each day she misses writing in her diary (122) rather than writing what happened. At other times however, she uses ellipses (…) and dashes (–) when writing in her diary, implying a follow up that never materializes: “But still…just the thought of my own father—“(109), “my hand is shaking so hard—but I want to leave this

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\(^{39}\) Papa Doc means Daddy Doctor in French.
record just so the world knows—“(137). In the Time of the Butterflies shares this idea as well. Maria Teresa’s personal journal (or little book⁴⁰ as she calls it) shows an increase in textual gaps the more involved she becomes in the efforts against Trujillo’s regime. Disruptions in her diary are marked by the author herself, this time in English, small handwriting and in brackets: [pages torn out] (234, 238, 241, 242, 243). In another instance she decides to blot out her and other people’s names in the written testimony she passes on to the Organization of American States Committee investigating Human rights abuses:

That’s when Bug Eye slammed him with a fist, knocking him down. How dare scum dictate terms to the captain! Then all of them joined in kicking until he was writhing in agony on the floor […] Then Johnny asked me if I couldn’t persuade . After all, , , , , and had all reconsidered” (254).

By deliberately erasing the names of her written testimony, in order to protect others, Maria Teresa reclaims the control over her experiences of dictatorship. She is not silenced but exerts her right to remain silent. All characters decide and control the gaze of those reading them and simultaneously encourage alternative and creative interpretations of their experiences with dictatorship.

Seeing the Trans-Caribbean: Visual Disruptions

In theory, Trans-Caribbean narratives challenge the anticipated and expected responses toward dictatorial regimes: they reveal the domestic complicities that made the regime thrive; prefer not to dwell on the atrocities committed by the regime, use fiction rather than history to explore the effects of a culturally hegemonic discourse that transcends its sociopolitical context and geographical space and most importantly, challenge the narrow roles assigned to the

⁴⁰ I could not help but notice the parallels between “little book” in In the Time of the Butterflies and “little country” or el paisíto from Finding Miracles. I believe that Julia Álvarez’s uses of diminutives for both are a way to challenge the cultural relevance assigned to the written discourse and the geographical context in narratives of dictatorship.
Caribbean and its inhabitants by virtue of their colonial past. In sum, Trans-Caribbean narratives of dictatorship articulate new ways to see (and represent) the Caribbean.

To willingly assert silences and gaps is a double-edge sword, as it can be interpreted as a refusal to bear witness to the wrongdoings of dictatorship. Literary responses toward violence are, after all, highly codified and somehow mark the distinction between those who suffer and those who inflict the suffering. Silences are equally charged. Furthermore, John Whittier Treat explains in his introduction to *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb*, how these responses are conditioned by space:

> The geographical difference that determined living from dying is also a difference that determines meaning. First, there is meaning in language, as greater distance from the *silent* epicenter parallels the greater ease with which the victim of nuclear war can speak of the fact of that day; and second, there is meaning in the multitude of other ways, the survivor of atrocity may seek to reconcile experience, memory, guilt, and rage with—and against—those inherited cultural systems of mediation incongruent with such lived reality (x).

It is important to notice that while Treat acknowledges these responses, his analysis ultimately transcends their determinism, for he proposes that the concept of the potential hibakusha⁴¹ (bomb victim) now “extend to everyone alive today in any region of the planet targeted by warhead-carrying missiles, or, in our newly fragmented post-Cold War world, any region contested by any of the rapidly expanding “nuclear club of nations. This is in effect to say all of us, although unlike the survivors of Hiroshima or Nagasaki, who had no credible warning, we have been ‘prepared’ to what lies ahead” (x-xi).

All these arguments lead us to one of the most interesting characteristics of Trans-Caribbean narratives of dictatorship, namely, how these stories incorporate visual elements to

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⁴¹ John Whittier Treat takes the term hibakusha to have two common meanings. The first meaning refers to anyone who was physically present in either of the cities when they were bombed, or shortly thereafter. The second meaning, however, refers to all those related to Hiroshima and Nagasaki on account of birth (as the child of a hibakusha for example, or as an absent native of either city), family, nationality, or other contingent affinity. These second definition of hibakusha is akin to Trans-Caribbean narratives of dictatorship.
disrupt commodified gazes and spaces. The Caribbean has a long history of being defined and
appropriated through cultural discourses cemented in visual and linguistic elements that refer
mostly to its utopian landscape. Likewise, in my first chapter, I discussed how the abandoned
ruins of a forgotten citadel and the lush exuberance of the Caribbean baroque landscape inspired
Carpentier’s marvelous-realism and later the Latin American boom. The literary emphasis on the
Caribbean landscape through the use of visual imagery reasserts the utilitarian aspects of a
cultural discourse that renders both the inhabitants of such a space and their experiences
invisible. In the following paragraphs I analyze how the texts and authors included in this
discussion relate to the literary ideals that emerge out of the landscape and visual representations
of the Caribbean, particularly in relation to dictatorial regimes.

Trans-Caribbean narratives acknowledge or present how the Caribbean has been
determined and held captive by its landscape. The main difference, however, is how these
narratives always assert venues to escape the signifying power of these visual configurations. In
the past, for example, Carpentier’s forgotten citadel and ruined landscapes was taken as a self-
contained metaphor that defined the utopian singularity of American thought. It meant both the
failure of European-derived models of thought (the dictatorial regime) and the predominance of
natural American cosmogonies. Trans-Caribbean narratives, however, assert not origins or
ends (which would imply time and location) but cross-cultural interactions and their creative
outcomes.

Trans-Caribbean narratives use images and visual markers to counteract the traditional
emphasis on geography and historical context that permeates Caribbean dictatorial narratives.

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42 Given that cosmogony means “the study of the origin and development of the universe,” I am presuming that
Carpentier was very much invested in the idea of an American discursive origin, which in turn, refers us back to a
logocentric paradigm in which words have an inherent relation to the object they represent, and which Trans-
Caribbean authors are in contention with.
These stories simultaneously assert the normalizing and silencing effects of dictatorial experiences and the insufficiency of language in conveying the Caribbean experience and its people. Gaps are visually marked and hard to ignore, whether it is because of dashes, ellipses, blotted texts, or blank spaces or because the text that includes the gaps is capitalized, boldfaced or written in lowercase letters.

In her book, *Modernism, The Visual and Caribbean Literature* (2007) Mary Lou Emery explains that the colonial movements for political independence of the early and mid-twentieth century and the post-independence made increasingly possible for Caribbean writers to address in their stories the dynamics of vision to:

> [...] repeatedly address the condition of enslaved or indentured ancestors who were denied the power to see and [were] – used as commodified objects of a marker gaze, picturesque figures in a tropical paradise, or visual markers of nineteenth century racialist categories – to constitute that power in others. In their writings, they reconstruct visionary subjectivity for these ancestors and their descendants (2).

Trans-Caribbean narratives address how dynamics of vision in literature are very much related to shifting conceptions of power informed by different sociopolitical conditions, such as dictatorial regimes. In an interview regarding his first published book, *Drown*, Junot Díaz elaborates:

> If you’ve done drugs, and you’ve fucked, what more do you need? What am I describing and for whose benefit? Who’s benefiting from anthropology? I figure that my audience knows what the fuck I’m talking about. And if other people want their voyeuristic thrills, they need to go elsewhere. Plenty of writers of color will give you that voyeuristic thrill. I just don’t want to participate in those patterns. Way too often writers of color are, basically, nothing more than performers of their “otherness”. I am trying to figure out ways to disrupt that (*Other Voices* 36, 2002).

While Mary Lou Emery explains visual dynamics as the unidirectional shift in power between observers (oppressors) and observed (oppressed), Trans-Caribbean authors such as Junot Díaz describe them in terms of performance, a relativity of sorts that asserts open endings and
disruptions of those “master narratives” that sustain dictatorial regimes. Edwidge Danticat and Julia Alvarez share this idea as well and use the categories of sensory perception that implicitly guide Caribbean cultural studies to disrupt easy representations. In *Krik? Krak!*, for example, Edwidge Danticat performs “orality” through her writing. The title of the book refers to the call and response of the Haitian tradition of storytelling, which is usually followed by light stories, jokes and riddles. In her written performance Danticat reveals her distrust of conventional or formulaic inscriptions of the nation. The stories that follow the call and response are anything but light jokes. Instead they convey the cultural difficulties of ascribing a message to a particular medium.

Edwidge Danticat’s incorporation of visual elements in her stories is perhaps the shiest attempt of the three authors discussed in this dissertation, for her interpretations are mostly text-driven. By this I mean that Danticat’s visual cues are effected exclusively through changes in the text. In the story “Children of the Sea,” for example, the two main characters each have a different way to inscribe their dictatorial experiences. The man in the story writes at the beginning:

They say behind the mountains are more mountains. Now I know it’s true. I also know there are timeless waters, endless seas, and lots of people in this world whose names don’t matter to anyone but themselves. I look up at the sky and I see you there. I see you crying like a crushed snail, the way you cried when I helped you pull out your first loose tooth. Yes, I did love you then. Somehow when I looked at you, I thought of fiery red ants. I wanted you to dig your fingernails into my skin and drain out all of my blood (3).

To this the woman answers (metaphorically) at the end:

i am writing to you from the bottom of the banyan tree. manman says that banyan trees are holy and sometimes if we call the gods from beneath them, they will hear our voices clearer. now there are always butterflies around me, black ones that I refuse to let find my hand. I throw big rocks at them, but they are always too fast. Last night on the radio, i heard that another boat sank off the coast of the Bahamas. i can’t think about you being in there in
the waves. my hair shivers. from here i cannot even see the sea. behind these mountains are mountains and more black butterflies still and a sea that is endless like my love for you [Boldface and orthography given].

Both characters have very different experiences with the dictatorship. Their differences, already marked by their personal subjectivities, include gender, social and economical class, age, distance and geographical location. In a traditional narrative of dictatorship these differences tend to vanish as they are subsumed within communal suffering and acts of resistance against the individual oppressor/dictator. Danticat claims and makes visible different experiences of dictatorship by using the text as a conceptual map.

Both excerpts are reproduced exactly as they appear in the original, bold typeface and choice of syntax included. Furthermore, the man who is fleeing Haiti follows the rules of syntax and form. Moreover, he organizes his ideas in cohesive and coherent paragraphs. His way of inscribing his experiences with dictatorship can be best described as normative. His tone, for example, is authoritative and at times he seems detached from what he is experiencing. He often refers to the age of his lover, whom “he helped pull her first loose tooth” (3) and refers to her lack of experience with the dictatorship due to the fact that she “have always been so closely watched by your father in that well-guarded house with your genteel mother,” (9) despite the woman being the one that stays behind suffering the direct effects of the regime.

The woman, however, uses lowercase lettering and writes in boldface. This way to inscribe her experience contrasts with the way that traditional stories of dictatorship would represent the perfect dispossessed and powerless victim: a young female that has no direct control of her actions and circumstances. The character refuses to use capital letters to distinguish among proper names, social roles of authority (such as her manman, papa or madam roger) or even the beginning of sentences. Consequently, her choice of syntax destabilizes
narrative order and the social hierarchies embedded with it; hierarchies that implicitly support
the cultural imaginaries behind dictatorial regimes (such as the dictator as the father of the
nation). This last idea, in fact, strongly defies her lover’s condescending tone. Rather than
detaching herself from what she lives (as her lover does), the woman acknowledges the power of
dictatorial violence even within herself, when, for example, she wishes for Macoutes to kill her
father or for a bullet to hit her (11).

Danticat sustains the use of visual cues in her stories by thematically addressing the
visibility or invisibility of Caribbean experiences, an idea that can be subsumed in the phrase
“seeing things simply.” She first proposes this idea as a passing concept in “Children of the Sea,”
when the male character describes one of his companions in the boat, an old man smoking a
pipe, as a painting. He then adds: “Seeing things simply, you could fill a museum with the sights
you have here” (21). The idea of the museum as a space that houses a collection of objects of
scientific, artistic or historical importance for public exhibition and consumption echoes the idea
of the Caribbean as a landscape created for the ideological consumption of others. The aesthetic
value of the Caribbean landscape undermines the human experience and its individuals.

The second time around, Danticat elaborates more on her critique in a story entitled
“Seeing things simply.” The story is deceptively simple. Princesse works occasionally as a
model for Catherine, a Guadeloupian artist who hopes one day “to get Princesse to roam naked
on the beach attempting to make love to the crest of an ocean wave.” Catherine herself becomes
an artist after living abroad and becoming the lover of her professor of art (129). Meanwhile
Princesse wishes to learn all she can from Catherine and become a painter herself so that one day
she will “have something to leave behind even after she was gone, something that showed what
she had observed in a way that no one else had and no one else would after her” (140). On
occasion, Princesse crosses paths with an old man, presumably a professor, who maintains a strong resemblance with the old man smoking a pipe in “Children of the Sea.” The man, a drunk who spends his days outside of the cockfight arena “shooing away his wife with spells that never worked” (126), flatters Princesse as she goes by. The story ends when Princesse draws for the first time (in the dust) a silhouette of the old man and his wife after receiving an unexpected gift from Catherine: the portrait she posed for.

“Seeing Things Simply” does not refer to dictatorial regimes. However, it suggests a relationship among Caribbean individuals based on internal and damaging patterns of cultural consumption. Both women make private concessions (Catherine to her lover, Princesse to Catherine) and become part of a fetishized landscape to gain access and voice in a “civilized” world. They are complicit with their own exploitation, yet they do not remain passive for long. Catherine becomes an artist and gives Princesse the right to own the way she is represented. Princesse learns to see and create beyond these restrictive patterns of consumption, drawing in the dust and “leaving the blank faces in the dirt for the next curious voyeur to add a stroke to” (141). “Seeing things simply” becomes a series of rhetorical questions whose implications are far from simple. Are practices of seeing already coded in the Caribbean? Can the Caribbean subject exist beyond other people’s articulation? How can we see anew? Danticat doesn’t offer definite responses to these questions. To do so would be equivalent to previous practices of cultural authoritarianism akin to dictatorial regimes. Instead, these authors become active consumers (and producers) of Caribbean vignettes, fragments that, when juxtaposed with others, create new stories.

Each Trans-Caribbean author uses different fragments to articulate their own particular and subjective Caribbean landscape. The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, for example, uses
science fiction to describe characters and circumstances that otherwise becomes a “type,” given the traditional dynamics of power in Caribbean narratives. The graphic and visual nature of references coming from graphic novels, movies and comics speaks to the pervasiveness of “othering” gestures and how aesthetics depends on issues of race, color, gender, sexuality and class in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Díaz explores the effect produced by traditional figures associated with the Caribbean lore (such as cannibals, vampires and zombies) but replaces them with foreign characters (such as Sauron, Luba and Gorilla Grodd). The landscape in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* retains its hyper-sexualized, grotesque and racialized elements, but this time it becomes a true hybrid, a mirror that reveals more on the observer than on the observed.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo is compared to Sauron [fig. 1], the main villain from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. A close look at the filmic (and latest) representation of this fictional character reveals how this comparison enriches both characters’ interpretations on a discursive level. In each film of the trilogy, two images are used to represent Sauron. The first image is “The Eye of Sauron,” a disembodied panoptic eye surrounded by fire. The second image shows someone covered in a dark spiked armor. The neck disappears and is replaced by seemingly large teeth. The importance of the mouth is also asserted because both the movie and the book identify one of Sauron’s main

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43 Sauron is the main antagonist in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. In Tolkien’s invented language, Sauron stands for “abhorred” and is also revealed to be the same character as “the Necromancer” in his earlier novel, *The Hobbit*.

44 Luba is a female comic book character created by Gilbert Hernandez, of Los Bros Hernandez. The character is represented as a beautiful, fiery-tempered woman with enormous breasts that migrated to the United States with her half-sisters Fritz and Petra to escape her family’s past within Central America’s organized crime.

45 Gorilla Grodd is the principal enemy of The Flash in the DC Comics Universe; an hyper-intelligent gorilla with the power to control the minds of others.

46 I’m referring to the Lord of the Rings Trilogy directed by Peter Jackson. The trilogy is composed of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002) and *The Return of the King* (2003). The release of a two-part adaptation that antecedes this trilogy, *The Hobbit*, is scheduled for December 2012 (part 1) and December 2013 (part 2).
emissaries as “The Mouth of Sauron,” effectively separating the mouth from the rest of the body. The prevalence of eye and mouth reminds us of the way the Caribbean is “seen” and consumed as of today, the few disembodied qualities that persist in cultural discourse: the landscape and the cannibal. The fact that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* uses Sauron as a character akin to Trujillo (or vice versa), reinforces the idea of Trujillo as the Dominican Republic overseer, as a mythological force that cannibalizes his own people. Yet it also reminds us that he has become a fictional character that persists in people’s imagination by the power of narrative discourse.

![Sauron, the Dark Lord of Mordor. Images used in the 2001-2003 film trilogy directed by Peter Jackson.](image)

**Figure 1** Sauron, the Dark Lord of Mordor. Images used in the 2001-2003 film trilogy directed by Peter Jackson.

Junot Díaz pursues the ideological disruption of the Caribbean landscape and its transnational inhabitants even further with a few graphic images included in the novel. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* includes one image for each of the three main subdivisions in the story, plus an additional one for the inside cover of the story. The images are in order, an

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47 This character (The Mouth of Sauron), also reminds us of Joaquin Balaguer, Trujillo’s minister, ambassador and later President of the Dominican Republic, who downplayed his own role in Trujillo’s administration while leaving behind a whole plethora of books condoning and justifying his actions.

48 In the hard cover version. In the soft cover, the image decorates the cover of the book. Likewise it was interesting to notice that the Spanish version didn’t include these images at all.
atomic bomb (Fig. 2); the Rutherford Atom (fig. 3); a raised fist (fig. 4); and a biohazard symbol (fig. 5).

Thematically each image frames and summarizes the main argument in each section. Figure 1 uses the image of a nuclear weapon of the “Fat Man” type to convey the role of the fukú in the story. The idea of the fukú effectively changes the Caribbean landscape (and Oscar) in a manner only an apocalyptical event of unexpected proportions (such as an Atomic bomb) can. The fate of the Caribbean depends on external forces or powers (the foreign other, the atomic bomb) that causes history to be causally determined by prior events (such as colonialism, fukú or war). However, within the written text, Junot Díaz adds some “fragments” that disrupt the totalitarianism of visual rendering. In the pages that follow the image, Yunior, for example mentions that Santo Domingo becomes both the Ground Zero of the New World and “fukú’s Kilometer Zero; its port of entry” (2). The idea of a point of origin or convergence in the latest term contrasting with the total annihilation and destruction of a “ground zero” zone. Appropriately, this violent clash is akin to the idea of an atomic bomb. Lastly, the image both confirms and undermines the eschatological structure of most Caribbean dictatorial narratives. What appears to be an apocalypse becomes a new beginning.

Figure 3 shows the Rutherford Atom, a model that caught the popular imagination but was ultimately rejected by the scientific community when they realized that the atom is not a single particle (as portrayed in the model) but is made up of far smaller subatomic particles. In this sense, the image reminds us of the infinite possibilities contained within one “core” narrative.

49 The expression “Ground Zero” was first used in relation to the Manhattan project and commonly associated to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

50 “Kilometer Zero” refers to a point of origin: a particular location from where all distances are measured or converge. The most famous Kilometer Zero from ancient times that survives to this day is the Millarium Aereum (Gold Milestone) of the Roman Empire, believed to have given origin to the maxim “all roads lead to Rome.”
that are often not acknowledged by the readers. The image also speaks of the dangers of subsuming many Caribbean/dictatorial experiences within one framework; yes they may be popular but they are not necessarily accurate or tell the whole story. If Caribbean discursive (textual) representations are historically informed by the images that precede them, the images in Trans-Caribbean narratives of dictatorship have a dual function. While apocalyptic and fatalistic at first glance, these images become a cryptic and strategic reminder that the normative aesthetics used and imposed in the past are useless as they already render the Caribbean different and excessive. If the Caribbean discourse is in nature fragmented, then these fragments (or subatomic particles) have a destabilizing effect on master narratives, rendering these narratives false.

Figure 2. Atomic Bomb (Fat Man). Figure 3. Rutherford Atom symbol.

Figure 4, the raised or “clenched” fist image, conveys how Oscar, Abelard, Beli and Lola challenge their own particular oppressive circumstances. For Lola, to resist means to abandon Santo Domingo, a place that has served her as a haven against her mom, and return to New Jersey to fend for herself. For Abelard, it means to write what is forbidden about Trujillo as well as to deny the dictator his daughter (whichever version the reader prefers). For Beli, it means to
survive the assassination of her immediate family and her early childhood abuse at the hands of her extended family. For Oscar it means to meet Ybon and return to her (and Santo Domingo) after being beaten and threatened by the Captain (Ybon’s lover) and his minions. The raised fist, an iconic symbol of resistance that has been used by many, empowers the characters as they encounter difficult circumstances. As to understand figure 5, the biohazard symbol, it is useful to refer to the meaning of this word, which is simultaneously a biological agent or condition that constitutes a threat to humans and alternatively, the potential dangers from exposure to such an agent or condition. The biohazard symbol is then a reminder of how Trans-Caribbean subjects survive their own discursive traps. Oscar’s last book outlasts him, even though evidence against its existence is inconclusive. Likewise, Isis, Lola’s daughter, who is now protected by the three azabaches (Oscar, Abelard and Yunior) round her neck, will continue her family’s unrequited search for answers.

Figure 4. Raised or Clenched Fist. Figure 5. Biohazard Symbol

Visually, all these images consist of oversized drawings literally beyond the textual margins of the page, just as the Caribbean space in medieval maps was often beyond the margins of the known earth. In addition, each drawing is interrupted, either by the number of each
section (framed in a black square that partially covers the image) or the title of the book (which is framed in a similar manner). By doing this, Junot Díaz proposes *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as an alternative to medieval travelogues. While in the past, travel literature presented a coherent narrative or aesthetic, self-contained in the limits of the account itself, in the Trans-Caribbean, the experiences transcend the discourse.

In her use of visual images, Julia Alvarez, the oldest author of the three, is more daring than either Junot Díaz or Edwidge Danticat. Julia Alvarez’s visual recreation of the Caribbean takes in both Danticat’s text-driven approach and Díaz’s fragmentary resistance, yet she introduces spatial concerns in her images as well. Because I have already discussed how Alvarez uses text-driven visual cues, in the following paragraphs I will focus my attention on the actual images she includes in *Before we were Free* and *In the Time of the Butterflies*.

These two novels emphasize writing as a personal and subjective act through the epistolary or diary form. By contrast, most dictatorial experiences seem to be represented through third person, omniscient master narratives. The role of epistolary novels in narrating dictatorial experiences is alone worthy of attention, but when coupled with the use of images it provides evidence for the notion that the Caribbean is a product of both visual and textual discourses. This idea is further advanced by Julia Alvarez’s redrawing of the Caribbean space as a claustrophobic microcosm that confines its inhabitants.

The first time that Alvarez presents such as space is *In the Time of the Butterflies*. María Teresa writes in her diary how she agrees to accompany Minerva to a house her husband Manolo has rented in Montecristi. The Tavarez-Mirabal couple (Minerva and Manolo), are going through a rough patch in their marriage, and the house María Teresa draws in her diary (figure 6) becomes Minerva’s personal “domestic” prison.
Figure 6. The Tavárez-Mirabal Residence.

There are many important implications conveyed through this image. In the paragraph that precedes the drawing, María Teresa claims that Minerva’s new house isn’t half as nice as the house that Minerva and Maria Teresa’s father kept for his impoverished lover and children on the family farm boundaries. The irony here is that Minerva is the ideological leader of all the Mirabal sisters and the first one to oppose and openly defy Trujillo. In direct opposition to Minerva’s heroic image, María Teresa’s drawing reminds us that no one character is exempt from being restricted one way or another. It is within the walls of this house that Minerva weeps because of her husband’s infidelities. The house protects her from prying eyes that imagine her differently by virtue of her social and political commitments.
The second time María Teresa draws a room is when she is the one confined. The diagram of the jail cell (Fig. 7) which she shares with her sisters shows how Julia Alvarez offers a different spatial orientation, one that defies convention. María Teresa and her sisters are in the “South” side of the prison while the guards are in the North side, yet Alvarez reverses conventional orientations in her drawing: for her, south is up and north is down. In addition, the panoptic rendition of these drawings imply an awareness of the field of vision as a site of power and social control, which ultimately changes the normative roles assigned in dictatorial narratives. Visual surveillance is conducted by those who are supposed to be the prisoners of the gaze; a gaze that proves to be as confining and narrow as the space being represented in the images.
In *Before we were Free* the drawings of Anita de la Torre’s family compound (Fig. 8) and the 2nd floor of the Mancini’s House (Fig. 9) serve as the conceptual framework of the De la Torre’s story family. The idea of a restricted space is thus presented through these drawings as well as through the metaphor of Anita’s last name which translates in Spanish as “from the tower.” Given my previous discussion on how Trans-Caribbean authors use translation, I don’t think Alvarez chooses this last name by chance. Likewise, it is important to note that in both stories, the drawing/image that comes first is theoretically bigger than the second, even including a bit of the natural landscape that typically characterizes the Caribbean space. In the Tavárez-Mirabal residence image, for example, Minerva plans to grow a garden, which as the story progresses, is used to conceal, under a guise of domesticity, the weapons used in the attempts to overthrow Trujillo. Similarly, the dark foliage hides Tio Tony’s casita from the SIM agents in
Before we were Free. The landscape, complete with an old Taino cemetery, a guava orchard, an hibiscus bush and even caves (which were used in the past by escaping cimarrones) reminds us of the many problematic implications of what is often presumed as an inconsequential gaze.

The different ideologies demonstrated in all these strategies should not be interpreted as conveying the idea that one strategy is superior to another. Empowerment, through language, comes about only by acknowledging its limits and rearticulating them as possibilities. Language is transformed in the place for cultural interaction, but to achieve that, language needs to transcend such authoritarian practices as monolingualism. Translation, code-switching, textual gaps and imagery are only a few among the many other possible venues to achieve this idea within a text. After all, monolingualism is only one aspect among many that denotes cultural authoritarianism.

These visual and textual disruptions in Trans-Caribbean narratives of dictatorship strongly suggest the creation of a new aesthetics, a new way to write and to consider the
Caribbean beyond the typical geographical, ideological and visual representations we have long become accustomed to. Exactly what this emerging aesthetics means for an American discursive tradition is the main topic in my next chapter.
CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION: TRANS-CARIBBEAN POETICS

This dissertation started with the question of why Caribbean American writers felt the need to revisit Caribbean dictatorships in their fictional work and how their stories compared in relation to similar narrative traditions, such as the Latin American dictator novel. Julia Alvarez, Edwidge Danticat and Junot Díaz were chosen because of their thematic and biographical similarities. From a biographical perspective, they all had emotional and cultural ties to La Hispaniola, moved to the United States when they were children, decided to write in English and wrote their stories from the late nineties onwards. Trans-Caribbean narratives reject logo centrism, emphasize the private lives and daily interactions of their characters, seem very aware of their authorial role and its ideological implications, especially in relation to unacknowledged authoritarian leanings in Caribbean discourse, demonstrate linguistic and visual strategies of textual and thematic disruption akin to fragmentation aesthetics, and understand space and time different from their Latin American or American counterparts.

However, the similarities among these authors and texts guided the overall thesis of this research into unexpected realms. As I analyzed these texts, I became aware that the commonalities shared by these narratives outlined the existence of a new poetics that I identify as Trans-Caribbean. Trans-Caribbean poetics are constituted through four main aspects which are explored in each one of the chapters and authors discussed in this dissertation. These four aspects refer to the tensions between individualism and collectivism in Caribbean discourse; the function of narrative in relation to organizing centers or their absence; the reality of fragmentation as a phenomenon that is both discursive and thematic; and the multiple linguistic and visual strategies of disruption embedded in these texts. Trans-Caribbean poetics allow these
authors to propose new notions of cultural identity that are trans-continental, fragmentary, personal, relational and multilingual.

The first chapter discusses how Trans-Caribbean dictatorial narratives shift away from group-oriented goals and heavily-coded socio-historical circumstances to assert the realities and experiences of multiple characters. In traditional dictatorial narratives, dictatorships are larger-than-life events that define and polarize the characters within the story. Instead, Trans-Caribbean dictatorial narratives show that these regimes are much more than the ruling of a despot in a specific time period or that the heroes identified by historical discourse. To think of Caribbean dictatorships only in these terms reduces human experiences to certain characterizations, roles and time periods that hardly account for the transnational realities of the Caribbean. In not accounting for Caribbean transnational interactions, Caribbean and Latin American writers, perhaps unknowingly, emulate the authoritarian tendencies they are so ready to denounce and blame in “foreign” others.

To undermine these normative characterizations in dictatorial narratives, Julia Alvarez insists on characters that pursue their particular feelings, beliefs and desires amidst already coded circumstances. These characters consider their actions and experiences across national borders and as such learn to rely on their own personal realities to empower themselves in light of their dictatorial experiences, rather than being determined by them. Trans-Caribbean narratives, thus, can be defined as the sum of the relationship among different characters, perspectives, competing voices and traditions. The storyline is rarely linear but episodic. This structure allows for the inclusion of experiences that are silenced under dualist and normative representations of power and resistance. Perhaps more importantly, individualism (a common trait of the selfish colonial exploits of other nations in the Caribbean) does not preclude a sense of solidarity with others. If
anything, Trans-Caribbean authors are committed to a larger agenda of social justice, which they address with both their fictional narratives and their personal lives.

The second chapter builds on this newfound sense of individualism in light of its significance for the social and ideological structures that sustain Caribbean discourses of identity. Time and space, for example, particularly with reference to history and geography, serve as orienting points to identify and locate the Caribbean subject. Likewise, dictatorial narratives rely on figures of power (such as the dictator or the hero) to center and organize the meaning of the text. In this sense, notions of time, space and power have similar orienting effects for the Caribbean that many times do not account for its transnational realities. Through her characters, Edwidge Danticat grapples with the ideological meaning of these concepts (time, space and power) in Caribbean discourse. Danticat removes allegorical figures of power common in traditional dictatorial narratives (such as the father, the dictator and the hero) from the spotlight, while asserting their mythical, abstract presence in discourse. In other words, she makes characters and landscapes out of ideological and authoritarian tendencies that otherwise would pass unnoticed in Caribbean culture. As such, memories, ghost, myths and dreams play a pervasive role in the life of characters that otherwise would be minor or rarely considered part of the dictatorial narrative landscape. The experiences of these characters become even more tangible and real due to these interactions. These “minor” characters, in turn, decide whether or not to comply with these ideas, which carry the weight of collective cultural expectations. In sum, characters in Trans-Caribbean narratives learn to acknowledge the ideological weight of these abstract but familiar presences in their lives as a way to offset normative characterizations of the Caribbean subject amidst oppressive circumstances.
The chapter on Edwidge Danticat opens a discussion regarding the idea of the transnational family, which shows the real individuals immersed and defined by its dynamics. The idea of the family becomes intrinsic to the discussion of Caribbean dictatorial narratives, given the model of hereditary dictatorships that prevail in Caribbean cultures, where the dictatorial regime becomes a domestic and nominal version of absolute monarchies, which until now have been ascribed to foreign political structures that date back to the colonial period. To an extent, Caribbean dictatorships become an example of a transculturation process that no one wants to acknowledge. The colonial dynamics of the oppressor become an intrinsic part of Caribbean culture, which demonstrates its reluctance towards these dynamics by “masquerading” the now domestic trait. As such, politics of oppression and violence are always explained using “the other” rather than the self. In this sense, power dynamics become incestuous, an open secret that does not correspond with reality. Danticat, like Alvarez and Díaz, use familial relations to challenge the premise of a Caribbean community based on the similarities of dictatorial experiences. All in all, Trans-Caribbean poetics shift the “familiar” sense of direction that come with theoretical discourse, grounds itself in experience without narrowing these experiences to particular modes of expression and explores what would happen if these orienting notions of identity where to change.

In my third chapter I challenge the negative connotations implicitly ascribed to Caribbean cultural discourses, due to their fragmented aesthetics. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* aims for the re-signification of scattered fragments, blank spaces and themes abandoned by logos-centric discourses. Junot Díaz starts by addressing the historical and cultural bind in which Caribbean writers find themselves in when trying to become their own authors, the fukú that arises from the unacknowledged longings in Caribbean discourse, for narratives of purity,
consolation and cohesion. To challenge these ideas, Junot Díaz uses fiction in a way that transcends literary genres, notions of cultural identity, characters and even the Caribbean author. If for Alejo Carpentier the magic embedded in Latin American discourse emerged from a particular Caribbean landscape of ruins, Díaz counters this concept by showing us the ever-expanding Trans-Caribbean, an evolving space formed by fragments, silences and experiences that are sometimes better explained by marvelous tricks that defy all logic embedded in particular socio-historical or geographical contexts. The fragments in the story are not important because they are truthful in terms of what happened to the characters but because they show the transnational imaginaries in light of new practices of global consumption. These imaginaries consist of local and foreign references that expand the significance of the Caribbean region beyond its discursive normative boundaries. Likewise, Junot Díaz’s novel defies the idea that identity is tied to a particular Caribbean discourse. He shifts and consciously omits textual signifiers to alter, as does Danticat, the orienting points of Caribbean identity. In doing so, he allows for blank creative spaces waiting to be written. Trans-Caribbean poetics is, thus, a process that has no origin and no end as long as the Caribbean exists.

The last chapter asks whether or not it is possible to address the Caribbean from a linguistic perspective. Language is a contested signifier, both the mark of the foreign other and the weapon to resist its influence. In written narratives, textual practices reveal normative uses of language in place since the colonial period, where language became the aesthetic standard the colonies needed to adjust and be measured against. Trans-Caribbean authors answer to this linguistic paradigm by reasserting a long-standing tradition of creolization that accounts for the multilingual and multimodal literacies of Caribbean subjects. Different than the reductionist approaches shared by many of their Caribbean predecessors, a Creole identity is understood as a
de-centering strategy and historical reality grounded on the transnational movements that are characteristic of the Caribbean region, especially at the end of this century. Trans-Caribbean authors use textual and visual disruptions to suspend normative representations of Caribbean identity.

Textual strategies of disruption in Trans-Caribbean poetics include translation, code-switching and the use of textual gaps. A thematic and practical approach to translation reveals, among other things, the role of the translator in relation to the role of the author vis-à-vis the idea of language as an expression of cultural authenticity. In other words, translation defeats the pervasive, but unacknowledged, tendency towards monolingualism and shows instead the continuous processes of cultural and linguistic negotiation in Caribbean discourse. Code-switching complements the translation framework provided by Trans-Caribbean poetics by asserting the relevance of multiple languages and literacies that coexist alongside the normative aesthetic demands often blamed exclusively on foreign others. The last textual strategy used in Trans-Caribbean poetics refers to the use of textual gaps to acknowledge the limits of language, and discourse, to grant, understand, or convey identity. Silences, absences and textual gaps aren’t necessarily the marks of cultural trauma but often mean the result of a conscious decision that grants Caribbean subjects the opportunity to reinvent themselves amidst their over-coded discursive circumstances.

Trans-Caribbean strategies of visual disruption aim to challenge the long history of utilitarian appropriation of the Caribbean landscape by means of commodified gazes and/or spaces. Traditionally, the Caribbean utopian landscape means the erasure or complete submission of its inhabitants. Trans-Caribbean narratives, however, assert precisely those inhabitants and how they create new discursive spaces for themselves with the use of images and
visual markers. These, in turn, disrupt textual hegemony, denounce and make visible practices of cultural appropriation and signification, to acknowledge different modes of cultural production akin to new practices of global consumption and to effectively turn the Caribbean space into the Trans-Caribbean space.

While it might be tempting to describe Trans-Caribbean poetics as the postmodern response to the Latin American boom, which is after all, concisely represented in the dictator novel, the story behind it is more complex than that. Trans-Caribbean authors are engaged with multiple cultural discourses, a commitment that they argue, comes from their Caribbean heritage. As such, this research cannot be understood solely from the perspective of the French, Spanish or English Caribbean. Neither can it be understood from a Latin American or Latino perspective alone. While these writers and their stories are commonly (re)presented through a particular identity that refers to racial, national and ethnic, gender or positional articulations, they constantly defy easy categorizations, asserting instead the hyphens that locate them perpetually in the “in-between” of cultures and discourses. The fragmented and transnational characterization of the Caribbean region, its linguistic and cultural pluralisms and the relative and relational politics that characterize this region becomes an advantage in a world where power is no longer absolute but relative and is constantly shifting places. Whereas in the past, critical theory emphasized the “constants,” nowadays the attention has shifted to the variables and their effects on cultural production.

Dictatorships become grounding metaphors of cultural oppression to which Trans-Caribbean subjects react differently each time. In their portrayals of (non-normative) experiences with dictatorial regimes, Julia Alvarez, Edwidge Danticat and Junot Díaz renounce affairs of state in favor of story-telling and set themselves apart from previous Caribbean and Latin
American narrative traditions that emphasized social and collective struggle against a single tyrant. Instead, dictatorial regimes are thought of as a social structure that can accommodate different people at different times, with the result that every character becomes complicit at some point with the authoritarian dynamics of power embedded in Caribbean cultural discourse.

The strategies of resistance and survival articulated in the works of Edwidge Danticat, Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz build on a Caribbean tradition of resistance that echoes authors such as José Martí, Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, V.S. Naipaul, Derek Walcott, Pedro Henríquez Ureña and Antonio Benítez-Rojo. These resistance strategies go hand in hand with the search for a Caribbean identity; a search that has been formulated in terms of race, language and socio-historical processes of oppression. Jose Martí finds this identity in the interstitial spaces between “this America” and “the other America;” Aimé Césaire locates its unifying cultural tradition within the recovery of a black African identity (négritude); Édouard Glissant finds it in the notion of Antillanité which stresses the diverse against the claims of the universal; Derek Walcott looks for it in the mythical and asymmetrical pieces that compose the Caribbean “vase;” V. S. Naipaul finds it in the experience of travel; Pedro Henríquez Ureña finds it in the political engagement of writers committed to find the means for self-expression combining both form and figure; and Antonio Benítez-Rojo attempts to comprehend it through Chaos theory. José Martí, Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, Derek Walcott, V.S. Naipaul, Pedro Henríquez Ureña and Antonio Benítez-Rojo have changed the way we think of the Caribbean. They do not have the last word, however. That is part of the motivation for this dissertation. Many of these intellectuals longed for some kind of primal cultural unity, whether expressed through mestizaje, Creolité, Caribbeanness, Antillanité or transculturation. Trans-Caribbean writers have a broader agenda, one that I believe addresses the implicit portrayal of Caribbean culture as a traumatic
product of its colonial history. While these narratives acknowledge the importance of the colonial past in Caribbean discourse, the present and future of this region cannot be circumscribed to its past. Perhaps more importantly, these narratives show an identity that is being demythologized, and deconstructed by a poetics, contrary to what happened with other poetics in the past.

The Caribbean thinkers referenced in the preceding paragraph have helped me identify a Caribbean discursive tradition that speaks to the transnational exchanges typical and constituent of the region. However, I must admit the critical absence of narrative texts representative of the whole Caribbean region. In an initial effort to delimit my research topic, I decided to work with narratives that addressed Caribbean dictatorial regimes that were recognized as such, even if those characterizations were subject to criticism. The common topic of dictatorial experiences shared among these stories further advanced a new set of cultural identities. Although it was through the Latin American boom that these type of experiences acquired enough meaning to create a specific genre, a genre which in turn consolidated a Latin American narrative project and identity, the embedded dynamics of power in the dictator novel take us back to nineteenth century ideas that remain active but unacknowledged in both Caribbean and Latin American discourse. These dynamics of power rely on the ideological construction of a real or metaphorical other to create a sense of identity through opposition. The statement at the heart of these dynamics is. “I am what you are not."

With the exception of Grenada and Suriname, there is no history of dictatorial regimes in the English or Dutch Caribbean. However, as I have indicated throughout this research, references to dictatorial regimes help denounce current practices of cultural authoritarianism derived from the same ideas that sustained dictatorial regimes. I believe that Trans-Caribbean
poetics can be used as a new epistemological model to understand transnational discursive relations. However, I leave the development of that subject to a future time.

Throughout my chapters, I have suggested some of the main characteristics of these power dynamics: they are logo-centric, monolingual, historically-based, determinist, absolute, cohesive and comprehensive. These dynamics presume a prior discourse that becomes disrupted whenever there is a shift in power, therefore, an aura of pessimism and loss permeate their narrative representations. In her book *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*, Doris Sommer explains how these dynamics informed the Latin American Boom discursive and narrative project:

Some writers who had written circles around history in the sixties and seventies began to experiment with new versions of historical narrative. This return of a repressed tradition may arouse some curiosity about the fictions the Boom deliberately left behind, perhaps even a capacity to understand and to feel the passionately political quality of Latin America’s earlier novels. They had, among other things, the charm of promise that has since turned to bitterness at the perceived fraud. We may also notice that the Boom’s playfully pessimistic terms were largely accepted as literarily mature, which is perhaps to say flattering to a First World’s taste for the postmodern, the almost narcissistic pleasure of having one’s idea notions of literature mirrored back (3).

In contrast, Trans-Caribbean poetics emphasize the private/domestic space, which became second to socio-political narratives in the pervasive belief that literary discourse had the capacity to shape history. Private spaces have not been this popular since the Latin American romances of the nineteenth century, when love stories became a narrative formula to consolidate the nation after the Independence wars. But much has changed from that time. Romantic novels, in their attempt to create a national project hushed conflicts and forced moral resolutions that mitigated the allegorical distance between private and public spaces. Trans-Caribbean narratives, however, reveal the current status of those paradigms in an ever-changing interconnected world.
These stories attest to broken families, incest, cancer, deceit, domestic violence and familiar abuse, thus breaking the unite collective front that has characterized past Ethnic-American, Latin American and Caribbean narrative discourses amidst presumed larger or more important narrative traditions. Rather than being allegories for national conciliation, these stories encourage multiple and inclusive notions of identity amidst any circumstances, whether political or personal. However, they also reveal what happens when despite the circumstances, people choose to stay together and try to make things work. In this sense Trans-Caribbean poetics, while seemingly defeatist at first glance, are in fact inherently hopeful about the future.

Trans-Caribbean narratives play with concepts and genres that traditionally would have suggested theoretical immaturity. Proof of this is the inclusion of narratives addressing younger readers, the change of syntactical forms, references to Japanese animated film and game culture, science fiction stories, comic books, children drawings, images, etc. Children, women, nerds, and Tonton Macoutes (among many other characters) interact with intellectuals, men, ghosts, dreams, writers, Lwas and muses, and all are granted a voice and a space. Likewise, footnotes, personal journals, poems, history, folkloric stories, mythical beings, blank spaces and open endings create multiple narratives that can be endlessly reconfigured to convey the prevalence of dictatorial regimes from a broader perspective that accounts for the transnational realities of the Caribbean subject. Trans-Caribbean poetics thus, are meta-textual yet refuse to be meta-narratives. These authors, differently than their predecessors, insert themselves among already existing literary traditions, and acknowledge so in their stories, whether directly or indirectly.

Throughout this dissertation I have touched on the parallels between Caribbean literature and other narrative traditions considered to be the product of specific socio-historical circumstances, such as the literature of the Hibakusha and the literature of the Holocaust. These
similarities (origin, representation and authority) refer to the traumatic/scarring effects of power in literary discourse. Likewise, I have explored how normative dynamics of power help perpetuate the historical legacies of colonialism in narrative discourse, dynamics that in turn become foundational discourses of identity for the Caribbean subject. According to this foundational paradigm, power is exerted in an absolute and oppressive manner by a minority that conveys alien values and cultural dominance. Thus the Caribbean subject is forever relegated to being a victim of its circumstances. The prevalence of these dynamics in Caribbean discourse is part of what compels Antonio Benítez-Rojo to write about the repeating regularities of the Caribbean archipelago in *The Repeating Island*, repetitions that, for many scholars, become symptomatic of trauma.

Trans-Caribbean poetics share the symptoms described by common definitions of trauma, but they are not “traumatic” in the same sense. Studies on the topic of trauma suggest that the language we use to understand trauma is irretrievably marked by it because language is a cognitive process through which the final product should be coherent and organized. A common definition of trauma, for example, emphasizes the “unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language” (*Trauma, Explorations...* 1995, 176). Although Caribbean dictatorial regimes do not reach the degree of cultural destruction brought forth by the Holocaust or the Atomic bomb, they nevertheless share their “narrative symptoms,” though perhaps not their visibility. Trans-Caribbean poetics brings attention to these dangerous but implicit representations of Caribbean cultural production while transforming these “symptoms” accordingly. Silence stops being the most obvious effect of trauma and becomes an empowering act in which Trans-Caribbean subjects exercise control over their own representations. Language ceases being
cryptic, deterministic and unintelligible and becomes complex, multimodal, and sometimes accessible only to scholars who undertake the study of the many cultural and linguistic influences that inform and shape Caribbean discourse. This poetics, in turn, proves to be particularly useful when it comes to creating a model to analyze literature in light of its transnational circumstances. Trans-Caribbean poetics reminds us that the value of narrative, whether it refers to Caribbean dictatorships, the Holocaust or the atomic bomb lies, after all, in the resilience of the human spirit and the people that dare to rise above their particular circumstances.
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